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India–Japan Defense Partnership in the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical Prospects and Challenges Under Trump

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Abstract
This article examines the India–Japan defense partnership in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on its geopolitical prospects and challenges under the Trump administration. Strengthened by shared concerns over China's rising influence and the convergence of their Indo-Pacific strategies, the partnership has evolved beyond symbolic engagement to include joint exercises, technology sharing, and defense dialogues aimed at preserving a free and rules-based regional order. At the same time, India's reliance on Russian defense equipment, Japan's dependence on US security guarantees, and the "America First" policy under Trump pose significant constraints. To sustain and deepen cooperation, both nations must enhance bilateral mechanisms, pursue strategic autonomy, expand multilateral engagements, and promote regional norms. These steps are essential for building a resilient, sustainable, and strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific amid a shifting US foreign policy landscape.

Keywords
India; Japan; Defense Partnership; Indo-Pacific; Geopolitics; China; Trump Administration

INTRODUCTION

The association between India and Japan dates back to the 6th century, when Buddhism was introduced to Japan. In 1949, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru gifted an Indian elephant to Tokyo's Ueno Zoo to boost Japanese morale following World War II. Formal diplomatic relations were established through a peace treaty in 1952, and in 1958, India became the first recipient of Japan's yen loans (MOFA 2024). Japan remains India's leading ODA donor and was the eighth-largest foreign investor in 2020 (Simran Walia 2024). The current state of bilateral trade continues to reflect strong economic ties.[1]

In the realm of politics and diplomacy, India–Japan relations have grown significantly, evolving from a "Global Partnership" in 2000 to a "Global and Strategic Partnership" in 2006, and subsequently to a "Special Global and Strategic Partnership" by 2014. During Prime Minister Abe's 2015 visit to India, both countries pledged to deepen this partnership into a profound, comprehensive, and action-oriented alliance, aligning their long-term political and strategic objectives. Their joint "2025 Vision" has since established a guiding framework for India–Japan relations in contemporary times. Prime Minister Modi emphasized Japan's pivotal role in India's economic transformation. At the same time, both sides continue to reaffirm their shared

[1]In 2024, the bilateral trade volume between India and Japan reached USD 22.85 billion, with India importing USD 17.69 billion and exporting USD 5.15 billion (IBEF 2025).

commitment to a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," highlighting their determination to collaborate on a wide range of international issues and further strengthen bilateral relations.

Thus, the favorable economic and political climate, shared foreign policy objectives, and evolving geopolitical dynamics have contributed to an increase in defense cooperation between the two countries.

METHODOLOGY

The paper employs a qualitative research design grounded in three interrelated theoretical frameworks—strategic autonomy, balance of power theory, and hedging strategy—to address two central questions: 1) why India and Japan are expanding their defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, and 2) how the Trump 2.0 administration's "America First" doctrine has influenced their security decisions.

Strategic autonomy is understood as a state's ability to pursue its national interests and formulate foreign policy decisions without undue external influence. For India, the concept has evolved from the non-alignment policy of the Cold War era to a pragmatic, multi-aligned approach in the post-liberalization period (Mohan 2003; Rej 2018), reflecting a desire to maintain autonomy while engaging with multiple powers. For Japan, although its autonomy has traditionally been constrained by its pacifist constitution and alliance framework with the United States (Hughes 2009), developments since 2014, including constitutional reinterpretation, institutional reforms, and a more proactive defense posture, signal a shift toward what scholars describe as "autonomous alignment" (Smith 2020).

Complementing this, the study applies the balance of power theory to situate India–Japan cooperation within the broader regional order. The "balance of power" refers to a systemic or subsystemic equilibrium of capabilities generated by key actors to prevent a rising power or a dominant state from achieving hegemony (Zhen & Paul 2020, 4). This perspective highlights how external pressures and power asymmetries prompt states to form countervailing coalitions in order to maintain stability and prevent the domination of a single actor. Applying the balance of power theory helps clarify the underlying motivations and strategic significance of India–Japan cooperation. As China's rise alters the regional distribution of capabilities, both countries seek to forestall potential hegemony by strengthening their bilateral partnership while simultaneously maintaining close ties with the United States.

At the same time, the study employs the concept of hedging to capture the multidirectional nature of India's and Japan's foreign relations. Hedging refers to strategies that deliberately combine elements of cooperation and competition, allowing states to manage uncertainty without fully committing to one side (Kuik 2023). It functions as a form of risk management, in which states diversify their alignments and policy instruments to avoid overdependence or strategic vulnerability (Lim & Cooper 2015; Ojinaka 2024). Beyond nurturing the India–Japan bilateral relationship, India's diversified defense partnerships, including ties with both Russia and Western powers, as well as Japan's simultaneous economic engagement with China alongside its defense alignment with the United States, exemplify hedging behavior aimed at mitigating risks in the evolving Indo-Pacific security environment.

By integrating these three frameworks, the paper analyzes how India and Japan, through bilateral defense cooperation, 1) safeguard their decision-making autonomy, 2) contribute to

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balancing dynamics against China's assertiveness, and 3) hedge against uncertainties regarding US reliability under the Trump 2.0 administration. The methodology relies on a close reading of policy documents, defense white papers, official statements, and secondary scholarly analyses, enabling a contextualized understanding of their converging yet differentiated approaches to defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on India–Japan relations, in general, and India–Japan defense cooperation, in particular, has been addressed in numerous valuable academic studies. Bajpai (2019), in his article "India and Japan: Strategic Partners for the 21st Century," situates the India–Japan partnership within the context of three major transformations in the international system: the rise of China, the backlash against globalization during President Donald Trump's first administration, and the growing impatience of the United States with its traditional allies in Asia and Europe. These shifts have compelled India and Japan to pursue more independent forms of strategic cooperation. Within this framework, their growing closeness is regarded as a strategic inevitability. Bajpai concludes that the current environment provides fresh impetus for India and Japan to consolidate their strategic partnership. In the longer term, if India strengthens its domestic governance capacity and advances economic and technological development, it could emerge alongside China and the United States as part of a global power triad, with Japan playing a pivotal supporting role, similar to the role it played in facilitating China's modernization after 1972.

Horimoto (2020) characterizes the India–Japan relationship as a "public good" for the region. Historically, the US–Japan alliance has been described as a "public good" underpinning stability in Asia. However, it has often been framed as an "unequal relationship" between a superpower and a dependent partner. In contrast, the India–Japan partnership, if grounded in the principles of equality and mutual benefit, has the potential to provide a more sustainable framework for restraining hegemonic tendencies and upholding a free, open, inclusive, and democratic Indo-Pacific. Horimoto views the present moment as a "golden opportunity" for the two countries to move beyond bilateral cooperation and assume a proactive role in shaping regional order.

Joshy M. Paul (2020) examines the India–Japan relationship within the broader context of US–China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. According to Joshy, China, through its naval modernization program and anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy, has increasingly challenged US naval dominance in the Western Pacific while expanding its influence into the Indian Ocean. This development threatens not only US interests but also directly impacts the security of India and Japan. Consequently, both countries, classified as "secondary states" in the international system, have intensified their naval cooperation as a means to counterbalance China's hegemonic ambitions without forming a formal military alliance. The study concludes that the India–Japan partnership carries significance beyond the bilateral dimension, serving as a central factor in shaping the regional order of the twenty-first century. In the long term, India–Japan maritime security cooperation is likely to emerge as a vital pillar of the Indo-Pacific security architecture, particularly when aligned with mechanisms such as the Quad and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative.

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Situating India–Japan defense relations within the context of China's rapid rise, Keerthiraj and Sekiyama (2023), in their article "The Rise of China and Evolving Defense Cooperation between India and Japan," argue that China represents both the largest trading partner and the most significant security threat for India and Japan. According to the authors, while Japan has consistently adopted a proactive stance regarding India as a key strategic partner in safeguarding sea lanes and balancing Chinese power, India was far more cautious during the earlier period (2000–2014). During these years, New Delhi maintained a policy of non-alignment and strategic autonomy, carefully balancing its relationships with both China and Japan. A turning point occurred after Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014. The Modi government pursued a more assertive foreign policy, emphasizing national security and strategic partnerships, which encouraged India to move beyond its initial hesitancy and actively deepen security cooperation with Japan.

Keerthiraj and Sekiyama further highlight the strategic implications of this shift: India–Japan cooperation contributes to building a rules-based Indo-Pacific security architecture, enhances deterrence capabilities, and provides a form of soft counterbalance to China. At the same time, both countries have deliberately avoided forming a formal military alliance so as not to compromise India's principle of strategic autonomy or escalate tensions with China and Russia (India's principal arms supplier). In conclusion, the authors contend that India–Japan defense cooperation is a natural evolution driven by shared interests in response to China's rise. It should not be viewed merely as an "anti-China alliance," but rather as a calibrated expansion of cooperation, strengthening defense capacity and supporting regional order while preserving strategic flexibility to avoid confrontation.

Examining the specifics of defense cooperation between India and Japan, Chansoria (2023), in her article "Defense Diplomacy as a Foreign Policy Tool: Understanding the Evolving Curve of Japan–India Joint Military Exercises," analyzes defense diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy, with particular emphasis on the development of Joint Military Exercises (JMEs) between the two countries. She argues that in the post–Cold War era, cooperative security has emerged as a guiding principle, especially after the events of September 11, 2001, when global terrorism prompted states to intensify defense collaboration. Within this context, JMEs have become a critical component of defense cooperation, serving both as confidence-building measures and as tools of deterrence and strategic signaling toward potential adversaries.

In her discussion of Japan's security policy, Chansoria demonstrates Tokyo's shift from a posture constrained by its pacifist constitution to a more proactive deployment of defense diplomacy, with JMEs with India at the center of this transformation. Japan's characterization of China as "the greatest strategic challenge of an unprecedented nature" has driven Tokyo to strengthen cooperation with like-minded partners such as India. On India's side, Chansoria highlights the enduring relevance of the classical rajamandala theory, which views concentric circles of neighboring states as both threats and opportunities in shaping contemporary strategic thinking. This framework helps explain New Delhi's proactive pursuit of defense linkages to balance the influence of major powers, particularly China.

The article concludes that the series of JMEs between Japan and India not only enhances their defense capabilities and interoperability but also carries significant political and strategic weight. They send a deterrent message to China, reinforce the vision of a Free and Open Indo-

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Pacific (FOIP), and bolster the roles of both countries as pivotal strategic actors in the evolving regional order.

Next, Jojin V. John's article, "India, Japan and the Indo-Pacific: Evolution, Consolidation and Limitations of the Strategic Partnership" (2024), provides a theory-based analysis of how the India–Japan partnership operates under pressure and how minilateral architectures, particularly the Quad, shape bilateral military behavior. John characterizes the India–Japan relationship as having evolved from a narrowly defined bilateral engagement into a "strategic partnership" with both regional and global orientations, primarily driven by the discourse on the Indo-Pacific regional architecture. In this context, the article identifies four distinct phases in the evolution of the partnership: formation, realization, consolidation, and revival. These phases correspond to the broader trajectory of the Indo-Pacific concept itself—from its initial stage as a geographical idea, to its emergence as a strategic concept, and finally to its institutionalization as a framework for regional order.

Similarly, viewing the India–Japan relationship within the Indo-Pacific framework through a theoretical lens, Ghosh (2025) employs role theory. According to Ghosh, the national role conceptions of each country shape their cooperative choices: India's self-image as a "leading power" and "security provider" in the Indian Ocean both conflict with and converge toward Japan's transition from a constrained "civilian power" to a more "autonomous aligner" under the FOIP vision. The article further explains why India–Japan coordination is most evident in the maritime, logistical, and minilateral domains, arenas where role expectations are broadly aligned, while remaining fragile in the realm of hard, alliance-type commitments.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates an increasingly robust trajectory of defense alignment between India and Japan, driven by their shared perception of China as a challenge to regional security and national interests, as well as by their respective aspirations to enhance strategic autonomy and achieve greater international standing. The analyses also highlight key bilateral and multilateral mechanisms of defense cooperation between the two countries, affirming that the India–Japan partnership is pivotal in shaping the Indo-Pacific regional order.

Nevertheless, several research gaps remain. First, no study to date has addressed the prospects and challenges of India–Japan defense cooperation under the influence of US foreign policy during the Trump 2.0 administration. Second, the frameworks of India–Japan defense cooperation have yet to be comprehensively analyzed and updated; most scholarship has focused primarily on joint exercises and defense interactions, while defense industrial cooperation has not been systematically examined.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by analyzing the foreign policies of the Trump 2.0 administration and assessing their implications for the future trajectory of India–Japan defense cooperation. In addition, it aims to map a complete and up-to-date range of defense cooperation mechanisms between India and Japan, thereby underscoring the role of strategic autonomy in the evolution of their bilateral relationship.

FOUNDATIONS FOR ADVANCING INDIA-JAPAN DEFENSE COOPERATION

Strategic Indo-Pacific Space

In the early 21st century, the Indo-Pacific region's political upheavals created a "strategic space" conducive to the advancement of India–Japan defense cooperation.

Firstly, the Indo-Pacific is currently undergoing substantial strategic transformations, primarily due to China's rise and maritime expansion. China's emergence presents a shared challenge for regional nations: to restrain Beijing's assertiveness while maintaining favorable economic relations. At the same time, China's aggressive behavior and rapid military modernization have unsettled Indo-Pacific states, prompting them to seek new strategic alliances to counterbalance its power (Fravel 2018).

Secondly, the United States, as a global superpower, has facilitated the strategic alignment of interests among its allies and partners through policy adjustments in the region. During President George W. Bush's second term, the United States prioritized the Middle East in its foreign policy agenda. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with the aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, heightened concerns about the US's commitment to multilateral engagement in Asia, often described as the "relative decline" of US influence in the region. This context provided an opportunity for a "rising" China to expand its influence, intensify US–China tensions, and create conditions for the establishment of a counterbalance to Beijing.

China's rise has manifested in an increasingly assertive posture in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Given the geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of these seas, China's unilateral actions have raised concerns in the US over potential threats to maritime trade routes, thereby affecting the economic interests of both the United States and its regional allies.

The strategic rapprochement between the United States and India, exemplified by the 2008 US–India Civil Nuclear Agreement, which enabled extensive civil nuclear cooperation, served as a key catalyst for Japan's intent to deepen its engagement with India. Around this time, US foreign policy began shifting from a traditional strategy of engagement to one of deterrence, particularly in response to China's rising influence. This shift was symbolized by President Obama's landmark address to the Australian Parliament in 2011, later referred to as the "Pivot to Asia" strategy. Since then, a central objective of the United States has been to strengthen ties with key allies and partners, notably Japan and India.

The US's increasingly assertive stance toward China, coupled with its strengthening relationship with India, lowered barriers for Japan to pursue security cooperation with India (Bajpai 2019). Subsequently, the United States introduced the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy and revitalized the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), prompting several major nations to recalibrate their strategic outlooks. This recalibration emphasized the convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, thereby reinforcing multilateral cooperation among the US and its allies and partners. These shifts in the regional security architecture, in turn, facilitated the expansion of India–Japan defense cooperation.

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The Convergence of Japan's and India's Indo-Pacific Vision

India and Japan have distinct yet complementary economic and geopolitical interests in the Indo-Pacific. The Indian Ocean–Pacific connection is crucial for India, supporting half of global trade and 90% of its own trade (Mukherjee 2019), while the South China Sea is key to countering China's "String of Pearls" strategy and strengthening its maritime security posture. Japan likewise relies on these sea lanes to sustain its trade and energy imports. For both countries, the assurance of security in the South China Sea directly affects their respective strategic environments, the East China Sea for Japan and the Indian Ocean for India.

Despite differing alliance models, India's non-alignment and Japan's US alliance, both countries increasingly align in their Indo-Pacific visions, driven by shared aspirations for strategic autonomy. Japan introduced the Indo-Pacific concept as early as 2007 and formalized the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) concept in 2016, while India outlined its inclusive Indo-Pacific vision in 2018 (reaffirmed in the 2019 East Asia Summit). Moreover, their joint declarations in 2015 and 2017 reflected mutual recognition of each other's roles as autonomous actors shaping the Indo-Pacific architecture. Their responses to regional instability, particularly the rise of China, share notable similarities. While acknowledging China's economic weight, both seek to constrain its assertiveness through cooperative measures without undermining their policy independence.

Since officially designating their bilateral ties as a "natural partnership" in 2006 (MEA 2006), the leaders of both nations have consistently reaffirmed each other's roles. In 2016, Prime Minister Modi described Japan as a "special friend and a valued partner" (IANS 2016). These symbolic affirmations were followed by tangible strategic cooperation, especially as both countries grew increasingly wary of China's posture in the South and East China Seas. While Japan, as a key US ally, faces constraints in exercising full autonomy, it has increasingly diversified its strategic engagements, FOIP being a prime example, to enhance regional influence without undermining its bilateral alliance. India, in turn, balances its growing strategic cooperation with the US and its economic interactions with China by maintaining autonomy in decision-making and refraining from formal military alliances.

This growing alignment reflects soft balancing through strategic autonomy, allowing flexible collaboration without legal or institutional binding. Rather than forming a formal alliance, India and Japan coordinate through the Quad, the Malabar exercises, and shared principles, including ASEAN centrality, peaceful dispute resolution, the rule of law, and freedom of navigation, to support a multipolar, inclusive regional order.

As both countries' Indo-Pacific visions aim to establish a regional order that balances rising powers with liberal norms, their strategic autonomy enables them to engage with both the US and China. This approach sets them apart from traditional alignment models, allowing for adaptive responses to emerging threats. The India–Japan partnership, therefore, serves as a linchpin for sustaining a balanced, rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. At its core, their convergence is driven by shared strategic goals: preserving sovereignty, managing regional instability, and enhancing global stature, all while maintaining flexibility in foreign policy and strategic autonomy. Together, they play a pivotal role in shaping the region's evolving security and governance architecture.

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INDIA-JAPAN DEFENSE COOPERATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Since the 2000s, Japan has prioritized maritime defense cooperation with India to protect maritime trade routes and strengthen anti-piracy efforts, particularly following the MV Alondra Rainbow incident. This initiative laid the groundwork for broader defense ties. With the launch of the Quad in 2007, cooperation shifted toward addressing shared concerns over China's assertiveness. In its early phase, the Quad was perceived as Prime Minister Abe's political initiative to establish a coalition of four like-minded countries aimed at enhancing maritime security in the Indo-Pacific and countering China's unilateral actions at sea (Zongyou Wei 2022).

Simultaneously, statements from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs highlight this trend, emphasizing the robust advancement of India–Japan bilateral defense cooperation, which arises from growing alignment on strategic matters. This is primarily because both nations prioritize peace, security, and stability in the Indo-Pacific region (MEA 2023). Subsequently, India–Japan defense cooperation was significantly enhanced and reached new levels during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's third term, in both bilateral and multilateral dimensions.

Bilateral Defense Cooperation: India–Japan

Defense Interactions and Defense Dialogues

The India–Japan relationship is recognized as one of the few exceptional instances characterized by consistent and ongoing interactions among high-ranking officials. India–Japan defense interactions began in 2000 with Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes' visit to Japan, which established the basis for regular high-level exchanges. Despite a pause during the COVID-19 pandemic, these connections have helped establish a robust bilateral defense framework.

Annual summits, held since 2005 following Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to India, have contributed to underscoring the evolution of strategic alignment and the institutionalization of defense cooperation between India and Japan (Table 1). The 2005 summit marked a significant elevation of bilateral relations to a global level, the establishment of annual strategic dialogue mechanisms, and the integration of defense cooperation into a shared regional security strategy.

The 2008 and 2009 summits further institutionalized defense cooperation through the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC) and the "Action Plan to Advance Security Cooperation," while introducing the 2+2 dialogue mechanism and annual naval exercises, thereby solidifying security cooperation as a lasting pillar of the bilateral relationship.

In 2014, India and Japan upgraded their relationship to a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership," consolidating the foundation of defense cooperation through formal memoranda of understanding and deepening their strategic relationship. The 2015 summit marked another milestone, with agreements on the sharing of classified information, the transfer of defense technology and equipment, and cooperation in civilian nuclear energy. Notably, this was Japan's first nuclear agreement with a non-NPT signatory, signaling a clear elevation of strategic trust and an expanded scope of collaboration, emphasizing the imperative to strengthen India–Japan security relations in response to regional threats.

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Table 1: India–Japan Summits with Outstanding Achievements in Defense Cooperation (Source: Author's compilation)

Time	High-level Interaction	Strategic/Diplomatic Outcomes
August 2000, August 2001	PM Mori visited India	Launching the normalization phase and officially bringing defense cooperation into the framework of bilateral relations, laying the foundation for a new strategic orientation.
April 2005	PM Koizumi visited India	Starting this year, the summit takes place annually. Elevate relations to the global level, establish annual strategic dialogue mechanisms and integrate defense cooperation into a common regional security strategy.
July 2006, August 2007	PM Singh visited Japan (2006), PM Abe visited India (2007)	Formally shape the "Global Strategic Partnership," create a basis for comprehensive defense and security dialogue, and open up cooperation in naval training and exercises.
October 2008, December 2009	PM Singh visited Japan (2008), PM Hatoyama visited India (2009)	Institutionalize defense cooperation through the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation and an Action Plan to Advance Security Cooperation, supplementing the 2+2 dialogue mechanism and annual naval exercises to make security cooperation a sustainable pillar.
September 2014	PM Modi visited Japan	Upgraded ties to a "Special Strategic and Global Partnership." Signed the "Memorandum on Defense Cooperation and Exchanges." This, along with the 2008 Joint Declaration, formed the foundation of India-Japan defense cooperation.
December 2015	PM Abe visited India	Signed key agreements: Agreement concerning security measures for the protection of classified military information; Agreement concerning transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation; Memorandum concerning the Agreement on Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy.
October 2018	PM Modi visited Japan	Launched 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue and ACSA negotiations, promoted Japan-India Space Dialogue and discussed US-2 amphibious aircraft, indicating a shift towards substantive security engagement and multi-sectoral coordination.

The 2018 summit highlighted a shift toward substantive security linkages and multi-domain coordination, with the launch of the ministerial-level 2+2 dialogue and advances in cooperation across high-technology sectors, including space, maritime security, and defense equipment. Overall, the significant achievements in India–Japan defense cooperation have emerged mainly from these summit meetings.

The signing of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) on September 9, 2020, has generated renewed momentum for bilateral defense cooperation by establishing a framework for enhanced collaboration between the Indian Army and the Japan Self-Defense Forces, particularly through the exchange of military provisions and defense logistical services. The provisions of the ACSA took effect in 2021, were subsequently integrated into the MILAN 2022 framework, and have since been applied in all exercises and visits involving ships, aircraft, and military personnel between India and Japan (Embassy of India in Japan n.d.).

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ACSA serves as the logistical foundation enabling reciprocal supply and support between Indian and Japanese forces, thereby extending their operational reach and enhancing real-time interoperability. This development not only strengthens their capacity for deployment across the Indo-Pacific but also sends a strong deterrent signal to China regarding the depth of India–Japan joint combat readiness.

As Indian Foreign Minister Vikram Misri has emphasized, the "annual summit is the highest-level dialogue mechanism and the driving force of the agenda" (ANI 2025) of the India–Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership. It is through this platform that the frameworks of defense cooperation have been initiated, elevating defense and security collaboration to a central pillar of the bilateral relationship.

Building on the achievements of the summits, India–Japan defense dialogue has progressed through six key mechanisms: the Annual Defense Ministerial Meeting, bilateral dialogue between Coast Guards, the Defense Policy Dialogue, the 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Dialogue, the National Security Advisors' Dialogue, and Service Staff Talks (Table 2).

Table 2: Defense Dialogues between India and Japan (Source: Author's compilation)

Dialogue Mechanism	Key Milestones
Annual Defense Ministerial Meeting	Started in May 2006, the event has been held annually, except in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic.
High-Level Meeting between ICG and JCG	Initiated in 2006 under a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) to promote joint training, exchange of expertise, and professional engagement.
Defense Policy Dialogue	Started in April 2007 and has been held seven times to date (most recently in 2023). In 2023, India invited Japan to invest in its defense sector as part of the "Make in India" initiative.
2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Dialogue	First held in 2019, followed by events in 2022 and 2024. In 2024, the "Dialogue on Economic Security, including Strategic Trade and Technology" was launched.
Service Staff Talks (JSST)	This includes the India-Japan Joint Service Staff Talks (JSST) and staff-level dialogues for each of the three services. The JSST refers to the dialogue between the Headquarters, Integrated Defense Staff (HQ IDS) of India and the Joint Staff of the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF). The first edition was held in 2023, followed by the second in 2024. Concurrently, the staff-level dialogues comprise the Air Staff Talks, Navy Staff Talks, and Army Staff Talks. To date, India and Japan have held six editions of the Air Staff Talks (most recently in June 2025), seven editions of the Army Staff Talks (most recently in March 2025), and ten editions of the Navy Staff Talks (most recently in July 2024).
National Security Advisors' (NSA) Dialogue	The most recent, fifth round of the NSA-level dialogue was held in November 2019 in New Delhi.
Japan-India Space Dialogue	Started in 2019 following the 2018 summit decision; held three times (2019, 2021, and April 2025). It covers space policy, JAXA-ISRO cooperation, SSA, and space security.

These mechanisms enable both parties to enhance cooperation in targeted areas and collaborate more efficiently, fostering interactions across diverse domains, including high-level exchanges, inter-service cooperation among the Army, Navy, and Air Force, as well as

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educational and academic exchanges in defense, and cooperation in defense equipment and technology.

Notably, when the 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Dialogue was first convened in 2019, Japan became the only country with which India holds both an annual summit and a ministerial-level 2+2 mechanism (MEA 2020). The 2+2 mechanism is particularly significant, as it enables alignment of defense strategies with diplomatic initiatives while expanding into economic security and technological cooperation. It represents a pivotal step in strengthening strategic supply chains, providing additional leverage for India–Japan relations amid US–China competition, and offering ASEAN a model for integrating security and economic dimensions. At the 2024 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Dialogue, both sides discussed the transfer of Japan's UNICORN warship communication antennas and associated technology to India. This marked Japan's first defense equipment sale and technology transfer to New Delhi under the 2015 agreement (Reuters 2024), opening the way for deeper bilateral defense industrial cooperation with implications for the regional military balance.

Additionally, the Japan–India Space Dialogue, launched in 2019 pursuant to the 2018 summit agreement, has advanced cooperation between JAXA and ISRO in areas such as global navigation satellite systems, space situational awareness (SSA), space security, and the establishment of international norms for outer space. This collaboration enhances India and Japan's surveillance and early-warning capabilities while strengthening their capacity to deliver public security goods, such as satellite data, SAR support, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), to ASEAN. In doing so, it reinforces the India–Japan role in shaping international space governance and constraining China's unilateral activities.

Joint Bilateral Exercises

One of the cornerstones of the India–Japan partnership is the series of joint military exercises spanning the naval, ground, air force, and coast guard domains. These exercises not only reinforce operational interoperability but also underscore the shared commitment of both nations to maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Cooperation between the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) was among the earliest forms of engagement, with informal coordination dating back to 2000. This collaboration was institutionalized through a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) signed in 2006, paving the way for the Sahyog Kaijin joint exercise, which focuses on enhancing humanitarian and environmental response capabilities (The Economic Times 2024).

Naval engagement was further strengthened with the launch of the Mutual Naval Exercise (PASSEX) in 2007. These drills, typically held during mutual port visits by Indian Navy and JMSDF vessels, are designed to enhance tactical capabilities and maritime coordination. The establishment of the Japan–India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) in 2012 marked a significant advancement in bilateral naval relations. First held off the coast of Sagami Bay, JIMEX has since become a regular, rotating exercise in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific, aiming to foster mutual understanding and strengthen maritime collaboration through increasingly complex operational scenarios (Press Information Bureau 2012).

On land, the Dharma Guardian exercise framework was introduced in 2018 as a collaborative initiative between the Indian Army and the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force

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(GSDF). This exercise emphasizes urban warfare and counter-terrorism operations under a United Nations mandate, reinforcing the two countries' shared commitment to regional peace and disaster preparedness. Air force cooperation has been promoted through exercises such as Shinyuu-Maitri and Veer Guardian. Initiated in 2018, Shinyuu-Maitri facilitates operational exchanges and mutual understanding between the two air forces. The first fighter jet exercise, Veer Guardian, held at Hyakuri Air Base in 2023, has further deepened bilateral air defense cooperation through advanced aerial combat drills.

Overall, these joint exercises not only enhance the defense capabilities and operational interoperability of India and Japan but also carry significant political and strategic implications. They serve as a deterrent signal to China, reinforce the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), and elevate the roles of both countries as key strategic actors in the regional order (Chansoria 2023). The joint exercises, naval (PASSEX, JIMEX), ground (Dharma Guardian), and air (Shinyuu-Maitri, Veer Guardian), have established a multi-domain deterrence chain, directly influencing the strategic environment China seeks to shape in the Indo-Pacific. JIMEX, with its complex maritime combat scenarios, and Veer Guardian, with sophisticated aerial drills, highlight the growing tactical interoperability between India and Japan. This reduces China's ability to exploit strategies of "divide and isolate adversaries" or to leverage rapid deployments within a single operational domain. Most importantly, demonstrating capabilities across the critical domains of maritime, air, and land sends a strategic signal that Beijing must carefully consider before escalating "gray-zone" activities or intensifying regional tensions.

In addition, these exercises play a burden-sharing role for the United States. India and Japan's ability to coordinate independently in exercises such as PASSEX, JIMEX, and Dharma Guardian not only provides the US with more reliable partners in protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and regional security but also demonstrates the strategic convergence of the two Asian powers in maintaining a rules-based order. This contributes to the expansion of the "Quad" effect in the defense sector without necessarily formalizing it, signaling that the regional balance of power does not rely solely on the United States.

Moreover, India and Japan's practice of conducting regular exercises, extending from naval operations to include ground and air forces, has reinforced their image as "strategic pillars" of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). These exercises carry normative significance by promoting transparency, multilateral cooperation, and respect for international law, thereby challenging the legitimacy of unilateral or coercive actions.

In short, the series of bilateral exercises between India and Japan not only strengthens defense capabilities and operational interoperability but also has profound strategic implications, contributing to the shaping of a regional security order that is rules-based, more balanced, and less dominated by a single power.

Defense Equipment and Technology Cooperation

Technological cooperation constitutes a key pillar reinforcing the view that the India–Japan partnership serves as a major driver of substantive collaboration within the Quad (Zongyou Wei 2022). Defense equipment and technology cooperation between India and Japan has been significantly advanced through several institutional mechanisms, notably the Joint Working Group on Defense Technology and Equipment Cooperation (JWG-DETC), established in

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2014; the agreement concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology, signed in 2015; a joint research initiative on Visual SLAM-based GNSS Augmentation Technology for Unmanned Ground Vehicles (UGVs) and robotics; and the Japan–India Defense Industry Business Forum. Japan's release of new security strategies in 2022, coupled with the 2023 revision of its defense export principles, has further revitalized bilateral defense ties, creating a more conducive foundation for enhanced technological cooperation.

Since its inception, the JWG-DETC has convened seven times, with the latest meeting held on June 26, 2023. These meetings have provided a structured platform for advancing bilateral cooperation in defense technology. Regular engagements have expanded dialogue beyond the technical domain to include formal negotiations involving the Air Force Staff and other military branches, thereby institutionalizing comprehensive trilateral discussions across the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force. Annual dialogues between the two Coast Guards further reinforce this cooperation.

The Japan–India Defense Industry Business Forum, first held in 2017, marked key B2B engagements between Indian and Japanese defense enterprises. Growing momentum in bilateral exchanges led to notable milestones in subsequent years, including the 2018 visit of Japanese defense firms to Indian industrial defense complexes and the second B2B meeting during Aero India 2019 in Bengaluru on February 23, 2019.

These forums not only provide a platform for major defense corporations but also open pathways for small and medium-sized enterprises to integrate into the bilateral defense supply chain. Notable Japanese firms participating in these forums include ShinMaywa Industries, renowned for its involvement in the US-2 amphibious aircraft project, as well as Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Kawasaki Heavy Industries, leading corporations in aerospace and defense systems. On the Indian side, companies such as the Kalyani Group, with expertise in artillery and defense component manufacturing, have actively engaged in discussions on potential cooperation (Kalyani Group n.d.). The involvement of the private sector enables India to reduce reliance on state-owned enterprises, which are often constrained by bureaucratic inefficiencies, while simultaneously advancing the Make in India initiative to promote domestic production and technology transfer. For Japan, private defense companies, long restricted by export policies, now have opportunities to expand into new markets and diversify their client base, thereby reducing dependence on domestic contracts. This demonstrates that private industrial cooperation carries significance beyond commercial interests, contributing to the consolidation of technological and military balance in the region. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic slowed progress between 2020 and 2023, resulting in limited activity. Bilateral defense-related business was primarily limited to minor transactions, with no significant large-scale agreements concluded (ISIC Japan n.d.).

The 2018 Project Arrangement on Visual SLAM-based GNSS Augmentation Technology for UGVs and robotics marked the first joint research initiative between the two countries. Building on the 2015 bilateral agreement on defense technology transfer, it underscored mutual strategic trust. This cooperation reflects a deep level of confidence, as both sides demonstrate a willingness to share sensitive dual-use technologies. It also exemplifies the growing convergence between military and civilian applications, opening avenues not only in defense but also in industrial robotics, disaster response, and logistics. Within this framework, research organizations and defense technology institutes such as India's DRDO and Japan's JAXA and

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ATLA serve as key knowledge platforms supporting collaborative projects. Their involvement helps create a sustainable network of experts, less susceptible to political cycles, thereby reinforcing the continuity of strategic cooperation.

However, actual defense trade remained limited due to Japan's restrictive 2014 export principles. It was not until late 2023 that these restrictions were eased, allowing the export of domestically produced defense equipment to countries with end-user authorization. In early 2024, Japan further relaxed export rules by allowing next-generation fighter jets from the Global Combat Air Programme to be sold to countries with defense agreements, opening new prospects for cooperation with India. As of 2024, however, no official transfers to India have occurred, despite ongoing discussions over the amphibious aircraft US-2 and the Soryu-class submarine. These projects have faced prolonged negotiations, primarily due to unresolved pricing issues. Additionally, Japan is exploring the export of its naval communication antenna, specifically the Nora-50 (also known as "Unicorn"), to India. If successful, this would represent a significant advancement in bilateral defense ties (Chaudhury 2024).

Nonetheless, challenges such as structural restrictions, high costs, and India's policy emphasis on self-reliance in defense manufacturing through initiatives like "Make in India" continue to hinder progress.

Multilateral Defense Cooperation

Among India and Japan's multilateral defense frameworks, the Quad stands out as the most significant. Its primary objectives are to counterbalance China, foster pragmatic cooperation, and enhance influence and standing in regional affairs (Zongyou Wei 2022). Since 2017, the Quad has aligned member states' positions on the South and East China Seas, upheld the lawful freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, conducted joint maritime exercises in the Indo-Pacific, supported Southeast Asian maritime capabilities, and established the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) to "enhance and share maritime domain awareness to promote stability and prosperity" in the Indo-Pacific. Its infrastructure initiatives also aim to reduce the appeal of China's Belt and Road Initiative by offering alternative pathways and securing strategic influence in the region (Zongyou Wei 2022).

A key multilateral element in India–Japan defense ties is the Malabar naval exercise, which began as a US–India initiative in 1992. Japan joined in 2007, marking a milestone in trilateral maritime cooperation. However, it was not until 2015 that India formally invited Japan to become a permanent participant, institutionalizing Japan's role and deepening strategic convergence among the three Indo-Pacific democracies. This evolution reflects a shared commitment to preserving maritime freedom, a rules-based order, and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. The Malabar exercise serves as a critical platform to enhance interoperability, coordination, and trust among the navies of India, Japan, and the United States. Notably, the 2016 Malabar exercise, held near Okinawa, was just 400 kilometers from the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. It was widely interpreted as a strategic signal to China, underscoring shared security concerns and alignment among the three participating navies (Joshy 2020, 12).

Beyond Malabar, India and Japan collaborate in ASEAN-led multilateral frameworks, including the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defense Ministers'

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Meeting Plus, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. These efforts are synchronized to address global and regional challenges, with a particular focus on maritime security. They also co-lead the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which is widely regarded as a competitor to China's Belt and Road Initiative, also known as the Maritime Silk Road. The AAGC seeks to establish significant maritime connectivity across the African and Indian Ocean regions, enabling India and Japan to play a more substantial role in developing a new regional security framework.

Consequently, India–Japan defense cooperation has evolved from a focus on anti-piracy operations to a broader agenda encompassing Indo-Pacific security, involving regional partners and organizations. Their collaboration has strengthened regional security, enhanced interoperability, and built mutual trust in support of their converging Indo-Pacific visions.

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF INDIA-JAPAN DEFENSE COOPERATION

The re-election of President Donald Trump and the commencement of his second term in January 2025 have injected renewed momentum into security cooperation across the Indo-Pacific, including India–Japan defense collaboration. Although Trump continues to uphold the "America First" doctrine, recalibrating alliances and multilateral strategies, the administration's overarching objective remains the containment of China's power. Diplomatic and security measures since his inauguration have made this orientation unmistakably clear, as reflected in both direct policies and actions targeting China, as well as in the strengthening of cooperation with allies and strategic partners.

Immediately upon taking office, Trump 2.0 identified China as the central challenge to regional security and order. The administration has consistently condemned Beijing's unlawful activities in the South China Sea, opposed unilateral attempts to alter the *status quo* in the East China Sea, and openly supported Taiwan as part of its deterrence strategy (US Department of State 2025a). The US also emphasized the importance of strengthening regional deterrence through bilateral ministerial-level meetings with Japan (January 31, 2025) and India (February 6, 2025), resulting in agreements to deepen field cooperation and advance military technologies to counter coercive actions (Department of Defense 2025a, 2025b). At the same time, the Trump administration reaffirmed its commitment to implementing the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), which was authorized under Section 1263, to enhance the defense capabilities of regional partners (US Department of State 2025b).

US defense officials have highlighted the concept of integrated deterrence through joint exercises and partnerships, designating the Indo-Pacific as the Department's top strategic theater while emphasizing China's ongoing military modernization and aggressive behavior as destabilizing to the rules-based order (US Indo-Pacific Command 2025). The United States' heightened focus on maritime security, cyber defense, and the protection of critical infrastructure further incentivizes India–Japan convergence, particularly as both countries confront overlapping threats from China's naval expansionism and cyber influence campaigns.

In parallel with its direct approach toward China, the Trump 2.0 administration has continued to emphasize the importance of strengthening alliances and partnerships. A series of high-level diplomatic engagements in the early months of the term illustrates this strategy. On February 7, 2025, President Trump and Prime Minister Ishiba issued a joint statement with Japan, announcing the launch of a "new golden era" in bilateral relations, reaffirming their commitment

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to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, and advancing regional security (White House 2025).

In addition, US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and his Japanese counterpart, Gen Nakatani, agreed to deepen military technology cooperation and enhance field coordination to strengthen deterrence (Department of Defense 2025b).

The Trump 2.0 administration has also strengthened ties with the Philippines by increasing support for Manila's defense capacity-building. In February 2025, Washington announced $336 million in defense assistance for the Philippines (Lagniton 2025), alongside plans to establish a munitions production hub at Subic Bay to bolster collective deterrence in the region. One month later, the United States announced that it would deploy anti-ship missile systems and unmanned platforms during joint exercises with the Philippines to safeguard freedom of navigation in the South China Sea (Gomez 2025).

At the multilateral level, the Quad Summit was convened immediately after President Trump's inauguration on January 21, 2025, bringing together the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. The joint statement firmly rejected unilateral attempts to alter the status quo, while pledging to deepen cooperation in maritime security, critical mineral supply chains, and advanced technologies (US Department of State 2025a).

These US engagements, both bilateral and multilateral, have reinforced the confidence of allies and partners in Washington's enduring commitments to the Indo-Pacific. In turn, this has indirectly bolstered the momentum of India–Japan defense cooperation. Trump 2.0's China-containment policies have, in effect, created a favorable environment for closer India–Japan collaboration. With Washington's "backing," both nations have gained additional impetus to expand coordination in defense, military technology, and maritime security. In this sense, the strategy of containing China not only remains central to US foreign policy but also provides a solid foundation for India–Japan relations to enter a new phase of more profound and more comprehensive development.

Challenges

Notwithstanding numerous indicators of optimism, India–Japan defense cooperation faces unavoidable challenges.

Primarily, India's reliance on Russian weapons presents a structural constraint. India ranks among the world's largest arms-importing nations, with approximately 1.38 million personnel in its armed services. Between 2020 and 2024, Russia accounted for 36% of India's defense imports (SIPRI 2025), despite ongoing efforts to diversify supply sources. This reliance complicates India's ability to integrate Japanese technology and maintain balanced foreign relations, while potentially influencing India's political positions on matters involving Russia. Sustaining a stockpile of Russian-origin weaponry requires continued cooperation with Moscow to ensure the provision of components, maintenance, and upgrades. Consequently, India's participation in sanctions against Russia or overt support for Moscow's opponents in global forums could be constrained.

Meanwhile, Japan's alignment with the United States and its firm stance on Russia, particularly following the Ukraine conflict, presents a dilemma: deepening ties with Japan risks straining relations with Russia, whereas prioritizing Russia may hinder closer India–Japan

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defense collaboration. This structural asymmetry is especially salient: India maintains a long-standing and deeply embedded defense partnership with Russia, while Japan operates within a U.S.-centric security alliance framework. India's reliance on Russian platforms, including the S-400 missile defense system, Su-30MKI fighter jets, and T-90 tanks, limits its flexibility in fully aligning with partners like Japan, particularly in areas involving sensitive technology sharing or joint exercises. Conversely, Japan's security posture is institutionalized under the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty of 1960 and reinforced by the stationing of approximately 54,000 US troops on Japanese soil (US Indo-Pacific Command 2024), firmly embedding Japan within the Western security architecture. The result is that, although both nations share concerns over China's assertiveness, their differing structural orientations, India's Russia-centric legacy and Japan's US-aligned posture, pose practical and strategic constraints to deeper defense integration.

Reliance on Russian weapons also complicates India's pursuit of an independent and self-determined foreign policy. Continued defense ties with Russia may lead countries such as Japan to question India's commitment to shared norms upheld by Japan and its Western allies, including adherence to international law and resistance to unilateral military actions. This scrutiny could impede broader defense cooperation within the regional security context.

A second challenge arises from divergences in foreign policy outlooks between India and Japan. Although both countries share apprehensions regarding China, they differ in their approaches to engagement and regional involvement. Japan, constrained by its pacifist constitution, limits its overseas military operations and emphasizes UN peacekeeping efforts. India, pursuing a non-aligned policy, seeks strategic autonomy and maintains multifaceted ties with countries including Russia, the United States, and ASEAN members. With a substantial military force and active participation in UN peacekeeping missions, India's obligations and strategic priorities may not always align with those of Japan. Furthermore, the two nations have differing regional security priorities: Japan focuses on East Asia and the maintenance of its alliance with the United States, whereas India concentrates on South Asia and the Indian Ocean. These disparities may result in divergent approaches to defense cooperation, constraining both the scope and depth of India–Japan collaboration.

The third challenge to India–Japan cooperation may arise from the so-called "Trump shock." As a key US ally in Asia, Japan's security is closely tied to Washington, making it vulnerable to abrupt shifts in US policy. Historical shocks, such as the 1972 "Nixon shock,"[2] significantly destabilized the US–Japan alliance, and similar concerns have reemerged under Trump's "America First" approach. The administration's emphasis on burden-sharing and pressure on allies to increase defense spending has raised doubts in Japan regarding the reliability of US security guarantees. This dynamic places additional strain on Japan, a nation actively pursuing strategic autonomy in defense and security. In response, Japan has steadily increased its defense budget, rising from 5,400.5 billion yen in 2022 to nearly 7,950 billion yen in 2024. The prospect of the US imposing a so-called "protection fee" not only affects US–Japan relations but also risks constraining Japan's ability to exercise full defense autonomy.

[2] The "Nixon shock" refers to President Nixon's decision to end the gold standard for the US dollar, a cornerstone of the post–World War II international monetary system established at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944.

From India's perspective, President Trump's unpredictability poses a significant challenge. His administration may pressure India to increase purchases of US weaponry to help offset the trade deficit. Amid US sanctions against Russia, such as the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), Washington has urged New Delhi to reduce its reliance on Russian arms and shift toward US suppliers. This pressure has strained US–India relations, as the Trump administration publicly criticized India and imposed a 50% tariff on Indian goods in retaliation for its continued imports of Russian oil and military equipment (Nancy Jaiswal 2025). Such measures risk constraining India's defense budget and limiting its capacity to invest in cooperative initiatives with Japan. Although US and Indian leaders previously affirmed that their partnership constituted "the foundation of a free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific" (White House 2025b), serving as a strategic pillar of the regional order, these developments underscore the volatility of US foreign policy under the Trump 2.0 administration. This "strategic miscalculation" could drive India closer to Russia, further complicating the outlook for India–Japan relations.

Furthermore, the tariff war has also affected Japan and other US allies. Japan initially faced a 25% tariff, which was later reduced to 15% following bilateral negotiations in July 2025 (Francis Tang 2025). Even so, the Trump 2.0 administration's tariff policies continue to undermine allies' and partners' confidence in US commitments. The economic pressures extend beyond trade, generating uncertainty in industrial cooperation and regional security. As tensions escalate, India–Japan relations risk indirect impacts, particularly on investment projects and defense supply chains. Overall, the US's profit-driven approach may constrain its regional role, thereby limiting the potential for deeper India–Japan collaboration.

The final challenge stems from China's response. From Beijing's perspective, the strengthening of India–Japan defense cooperation amid US policy uncertainties is often seen as an attempt to construct a "balancing arc" around China. Chinese officials have repeatedly criticized Japan's alignment with India and other Quad partners, with the Chinese Foreign Ministry condemning Japan's "smear attacks" on China during high-level meetings with the United States, India, and Australia in July 2024 (AP News 2024).

Chinese analysts have also highlighted India–Japan joint exercises, such as JIMEX and Veer Guardian, as sending a clear "deterrence message" to Beijing, complicating China's naval calculations in the Indo-Pacific (SCMP 2023). Moreover, the 2024 2+2 dialogue agreement between India and Japan, which aims to upgrade the 2008 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, explicitly addresses China's "assertiveness" in regional waters, reinforcing Beijing's perception that the bilateral defense relationship is increasingly aimed at containing its influence (Sachin Parashar 2024).

At the same time, the intensification of India–Japan defense cooperation may not enjoy full support from ASEAN member states. While ASEAN benefits from India–Japan security collaboration through the provision of "public security goods", such as joint coast guard training, enhanced HADR capabilities, and shared satellite/SSA data, which strengthen regional resilience without forcing countries into complete dependence on either the United States or China, concerns persist. Economically dependent states may perceive a tighter India–Japan defense alignment, especially amid the turbulence of the Trump era, as potentially polarizing regional security dynamics. These states may feel pressure to avoid being drawn into great-power rivalry, raising anxieties over the erosion of ASEAN centrality. Consequently, while ASEAN

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broadly welcomes capacity-building support, it remains cautious about the strategic implications of deepening India–Japan security cooperation in an environment of intensifying US–China competition.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, defense cooperation between India and Japan, particularly as their strategic relationship deepens, must be understood within the broader context of the Indo-Pacific region. Over the past two decades, the evolving regional security architecture, especially the rise of China and its assertive behavior, has driven a convergence of interests between New Delhi and Tokyo. At the same time, the United States has served as a critical enabler in aligning its strategic outlooks, notably through initiatives such as the Quad. Together, these factors have fostered an increasingly robust defense partnership that goes beyond symbolic engagement, encompassing joint exercises, technology sharing, and defense dialogues aimed at sustaining a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

Nevertheless, in the context of President Donald Trump's second term, India and Japan are likely to encounter renewed challenges in defense cooperation. These include India's historical dependence on Russian defense equipment, Japan's constitutional and operational reliance on US security guarantees, and the uncertainties introduced by the America First doctrine, which could prioritize domestic interests over multilateral commitments. To sustain momentum and mitigate these constraints, both countries must recalibrate their strategic posture with greater autonomy and adaptability.

First, India and Japan must enhance the effectiveness of their bilateral defense cooperation mechanisms, particularly in critical areas such as maritime security, defense technology transfers, and military infrastructure development. The prolonged delay of the US-2 amphibious aircraft deal illustrates the political, legal, and economic constraints both nations face and shows how strategic linkage efforts remain limited by short-term interests rather than proactive engagement. While recent progress in bilateral defense dialogues is noteworthy, much of it remains confined to technical or symbolic achievements that fall short of generating long-term strategic breakthroughs (Rajeswari 2024). In an environment of intensifying Indo-Pacific competition, only high-level political commitments, accompanied by meaningful resource allocation and consistent policy implementation, can transform India-Japan defense relations into a more enduring, stable, and deeply rooted partnership.

Second, both nations should pursue pragmatic strategic autonomy by diversifying their defense partnerships and reducing over-reliance on any single actor. India can gradually reduce its dependence on Russian arms imports by expanding co-development and joint production with countries such as France, Israel, and Japan. Japan should continue to strengthen its domestic defense industry and reinterpret existing legal constraints to enable more proactive regional engagement. Joint investments in emerging defense technologies, cybersecurity, and interoperable military platforms would reinforce self-reliance while maintaining compatibility with allied systems.

Third, India and Japan should expand minilateral and multilateral engagement beyond US-centric frameworks. Deepening cooperation within groups such as the Quad+ and ASEAN-led forums would provide greater strategic flexibility. Both countries can jointly spearhead initiatives, including multilateral naval exercises, crisis response task forces, and regional security

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dialogues involving Southeast Asian, Australasian, and European partners. Such platforms not only reduce dependence on Washington but also cultivate a broader network of like-minded states committed to upholding regional stability.

Fourth, India and Japan must assert themselves as normative leaders in promoting the foundational values of the Indo-Pacific. They should actively advance principles such as the rule of law, freedom of navigation, open trade, and inclusive connectivity through diplomatic channels and infrastructure initiatives, including high-standard alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, recognizing the risks of escalating U.S.-China competition, both countries should engage China through parallel dialogues, Track II diplomacy, and regional confidence-building measures to manage tensions and prevent miscalculations.

Through these combined efforts, including the strengthening of autonomous capabilities, deepening of multilateral ties, and responsible engagement with regional powers, India and Japan can build a resilient and sustainable defense partnership. This approach not only enhances their bilateral cooperation but also contributes to a stable, multipolar, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order, even amid the uncertainties of US foreign policy under Trump 2.0.

However, comprehensive assessments of India-Japan defense cooperation's achievements, limitations, and prospects, particularly under the influence of US foreign policy, require additional time and evidence. Given the volatility of the Trump administration's approach, conclusions drawn from developments at a single point in time risk presenting an incomplete picture. Moreover, while this study draws on perspectives from policy elites and scholars, it primarily relies on secondary sources, which imposes certain constraints on objectivity. Future research could address these gaps through systematic empirical studies, including comparative analyses of India-Japan defense cooperation under different US administrations, supplemented by surveys or field interviews with policymakers, defense experts, and military officers. Examining how domestic political dynamics in India and Japan intersect with evolving US policies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the resilience and adaptability of this strategic partnership.

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CONTRIBUTOR

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Economic Liberty and Legislative Barriers: A New Assessment of Opportunities for Non-EU Entrepreneurs in Europe

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Abstract
This paper introduces the IMIGRENT index, a novel framework for assessing a country's attractiveness for immigrant entrepreneurship within the European Union. Moving beyond purely economic or integration metrics, the index evaluates six dimensions, including immigration procedures, company registration, and social services, to provide a multidimensional measure of entrepreneurial liberty. Applied to both EU and non-EU immigrants, the analysis reveals how national legislation and institutional barriers shape economic opportunities. The findings position entrepreneurship not merely as an economic activity, but as a critical pathway to exercising economic self-determination and fundamental rights. The IMIGRENT index serves as a vital policy tool for diagnosing structural constraints and aligning EU migration governance with principles of liberty, equality, and social inclusion.

Keywords
Immigrant Entrepreneurship; IMIGRENT Index; European Union; Economic Freedom; Migration Policy; Entrepreneurial Liberty; Self-Determination

INTRODUCTION

The issue of immigrant entrepreneurship is receiving growing recognition from policymakers, stakeholders, and researchers (Ram et al. 2017; Solano et al. 2019, 2023). This increasing attention is driven by several factors, including the reasons for migration, such as weather hazards or armed conflicts in the country of origin, the expansion of the small business sector, which highlights the contributions of migrant entrepreneurs, and the strong entrepreneurial tendencies observed among migrants.

In host societies, many immigrants choose self-employment because they struggle to find suitable jobs. In OECD and EU28 countries, around 12% of foreign-born immigrants are self-employed, though rates vary across countries (OECD 2018; Taddei and Solano 2020). Data from Eurostat and the OECD indicate that immigrant-led businesses generally underperform native-owned businesses, reflecting both disadvantages and untapped potential. Foreign-born entrepreneurs are more likely to operate microbusinesses and create fewer job opportunities, particularly in the formal economy. Moreover, immigrant-led businesses have a 27% lower five-year survival rate than those owned by natives (OECD 2015; OECD 2018; Taddei and Solano 2020; UNCTAD 2018).

According to the 2022 World Migration Report (WMR 2022), Europe is the top destination for immigrants, hosting 87 million people, or 30.9% of the global immigrant population. Asia follows with 86 million immigrants (30.5%), while North America hosts 59 million (20.9%). Africa is home to 25 million immigrants (9%). Over the past 15 years, South America and the Caribbean have experienced the fastest growth, with their immigrant populations more than doubling from 7 million to 15 million, now accounting for 5.3% of global immigrants. Oceania hosts 9 million immigrants, representing 3.3% of the total.

Immigrant entrepreneurship exemplifies the intersection between economic freedom and integration processes. Structural barriers such as segmented labor markets, credential devaluation, and institutionalized discrimination often constrain immigrants' access to stable employment, leading many toward self-employment and business creation. Within this context, entrepreneurial activity serves both as a strategy for economic survival and as a pathway to upward mobility. Through such initiatives, immigrants not only pursue financial autonomy but also occupy market niches, generate employment, and stimulate local economic growth (Elmi et al. 2024).

Entrepreneurial opportunities available to immigrants and refugees vary significantly depending on their legal access to the labor market (Newman et al. 2024). Research on immigrant entrepreneurship continues to expand, with a recent systematic review identifying key developments in the field (Dabić et al. 2020). Refugee entrepreneurs typically possess less social capital, fewer financial resources, and greater uncertainty due to their visa status, particularly those on temporary or bridging visas while seeking asylum. Additionally, refugees often experience higher levels of trauma than voluntary migrants, who generally have more choice in relocation, better preparation, and greater financial access (Campion 2018; Hynes 2011). Understanding the distinctions between refugees and voluntary immigrants requires considering the diverse experiences of involuntary migrants, shaped by factors such as mode of arrival, visa category, and prior social status (Hynes 2011). For example, asylum seekers on temporary visas without permanent protection face restricted access to formal employment and limited financial resources to start or expand a business.

European Union policies constitute a critical framework for shaping immigrant opportunities and integration within member states. By establishing common rules for legal migration, regulating asylum and border procedures through the Pact on Migration and Asylum, and influencing national labor-market frameworks through instruments such as the Action Plan on Integration, the EU significantly affects migrants' access to employment, social services, and civic participation. These policy measures aim to balance the interests of host societies and migrants. The interplay between supranational directives and national implementation underscores the importance of institutional frameworks in mediating immigrants' rights and opportunities, illustrating how regulatory design can either facilitate or constrain economic and social inclusion (OECD 2018; EC 2025).

The present study examines the challenges faced by non-EU entrepreneurs seeking to establish businesses within the EU. It explores key issues such as immigration procedures, company registration and ownership, access to social services, and other relevant factors that extend beyond purely economic considerations or integration aspects discussed in previous research.

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The objectives of this analysis are threefold: 1) to examine key indexes widely cited in the literature, such as EUCHAM (2020) and MIPEX, that assess immigrant entrepreneurship, and to analyze how host countries and their legislative frameworks shape these indexes; 2) to develop a more comprehensive methodology, referred to as IMIGRENT, for measuring the attractiveness of foreign countries for entrepreneurial activities. This method integrates a broader range of influencing factors, including social, economic, personal, climatic, and security-related aspects, all of which contribute to the decision-making process of starting a business abroad; and 3) to extend the analysis to non-EU immigrants who wish to start a business within the EU. For this purpose, European legislation on immigration from outside the EU has been reviewed to assess the impact of citizenship status on the final attractiveness score across European countries.

The significance of this analysis lies in its capacity to provide a reliable, multidimensional measure of a country's attractiveness to entrepreneurial activity, tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of foreign entrepreneurs, depending on their citizenship and individual requirements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing complexity of global migration, driven by environmental change, geopolitical instability, and demographic transitions, poses significant challenges for governance systems (Biermann and Boas 2010). These evolving dynamics have generated mixed migration flows that are difficult to predict and manage, calling for policy frameworks that are both adaptive and forward-looking. Scholars emphasize the need for dynamic governance approaches that integrate environmental, political, and demographic factors, thereby ensuring that migration policies remain responsive to rapidly changing contexts while balancing state interests with the protection of migrants' rights (de Haas 2011).

Immigrant entrepreneurship represents a key driver of economic dynamism; however, its relationship to equality of opportunity and social justice remains deeply contested. While immigrant-owned enterprises contribute to innovation, job creation, and local development, entrepreneurs frequently encounter structural barriers, including discriminatory regulatory regimes, limited access to financial capital, and exclusion from mainstream support systems. These obstacles restrict not only their economic potential but also their broader social integration within host societies. Advancing immigrant entrepreneurship as a mechanism of social justice, therefore, requires more than acknowledging its economic contributions; it necessitates dismantling institutional and societal inequities and establishing inclusive policy frameworks that enable genuine economic participation and empowerment (Ram et al. 2017; Zhou 2004; Desiderio 2014; Rath and Swagerman 2016; Solano et al. 2019).

Solano's (2022) comparative study provides a comprehensive analysis of the legal and policy environments affecting immigrant entrepreneurs in EU and OECD countries. The findings reveal that institutional frameworks often restrict access to self-employment for certain immigrant groups, depending on their legal status. Although various support measures exist for migrant entrepreneurs, these initiatives frequently treat them as a homogeneous group, overlooking their diverse backgrounds and specific needs. The study further underscores that an integrated social and economic approach is essential for effectively empowering immigrants (Bužinkić 2017).

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Barriers to entrepreneurship can significantly constrain fundamental economic and social rights by limiting individuals' capacity for self-determination and access to opportunity. Structural impediments, such as limited access to capital, restrictive regulatory environments, and systemic bias, often prevent prospective entrepreneurs from establishing and sustaining businesses. These constraints not only undermine economic freedom but also impede personal and professional development, restricting individuals' ability to shape their life trajectories and improve their socio-economic standing. From a rights-based perspective, such limitations constitute a denial of core entitlements, underscoring the critical intersection between institutional frameworks, economic opportunity, and social justice in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes (Ram et al. 2017; Bajajfinserv 2025).

The study of immigrant entrepreneurship has developed a robust theoretical foundation for explaining why immigrants pursue self-employment and how their ventures succeed. The blocked-opportunity theory holds that exclusion from mainstream labor markets drives immigrants toward entrepreneurship as an adaptive strategy (Light 1972; Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward 1990). Social and ethnic networks also play a pivotal role by facilitating access to resources, labor, and customers that might otherwise be inaccessible (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Aldrich and Waldinger 1990). The middleman minority theory conceptualizes certain immigrant groups as occupying intermediary economic niches, bridging transactions between dominant and subordinate populations (Bonacich 1973). Meanwhile, the enclave economy hypothesis emphasizes the economic advantages generated through co-ethnic clustering and localized market structures (Wilson and Portes 1980).

More recent approaches highlight the interaction between social networks, market conditions, and institutional contexts. The mixed embeddedness framework emphasizes how immigrant entrepreneurship emerges at the intersection of structural opportunities within the economy and the institutional environment, as well as the relational resources found in ethnic communities (Kloosterman, Van der Leun, and Rath 1999; Kloosterman and Rath 2001). Immigrant entrepreneurs often face barriers such as limited access to finance, regulatory challenges, and constrained networks. They overcome these obstacles by leveraging both co-ethnic and transnational ties, which provide critical access to capital, information, and collaborative partnerships. This process enables immigrants to transform potential disadvantages into entrepreneurial opportunities (Katila and Wahlbeck 2012; Kloosterman and Rath 2010).

The mixed embeddedness framework advances this understanding by emphasizing how immigrant entrepreneurship emerges at the intersection of macro-level transformations in institutional and economic systems and micro-level shifts in social and cultural relations. In new venture creation, migrant entrepreneurs frequently encounter barriers such as limited access to financial capital, regulatory challenges, and constrained networks within the host society (Kloosterman and Rath 2010). To overcome these limitations, they rely on a dual anchoring of embeddedness: institutional integration into host-country markets and relational ties within their ethnic communities. Ethnic networks, in particular, serve as a vital source of capital, information, and partnership opportunities, thereby facilitating the entrepreneurial process despite structural constraints. By incorporating the institutional dynamics that mediate between entrepreneurs and the broader socio-economic system, the mixed embeddedness approach reconfigures the analysis of entrepreneurial opportunity (Wellalage and Fernandez 2023).

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Finally, transnational entrepreneurship theory underscores that immigrant ventures often operate across both home and host countries, enabling founders to exploit opportunities in multiple markets and benefit from global networks (Portes, Guarnizo, and Haller 2002; Drori, Honig, and Wright 2009). Complementing this perspective, entrepreneurial ecosystem approaches situate immigrant ventures within broader institutional, policy, and contextual support structures that shape opportunity landscapes and facilitate business growth (Stam 2015; Spigel 2017). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of why immigrants engage in entrepreneurship and how their ventures navigate structural, social, and institutional environments to succeed.

Building on the author's previous work introducing the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Index (IMIGRENT), this study further examines how the index addresses gaps in the understanding of immigrant entrepreneurship. It enhances the quantification of a country's attractiveness for entrepreneurial activity by considering several categories of factors, including immigration procedures, company registration and ownership, personal affairs and accommodation, social services, specific issues, and climatic and natural conditions (Koroutchev 2024).

Specific inquiries into national legislation provide valuable insights into a country's appeal for immigrant entrepreneurs. The evaluation of a country's attractiveness depends not only on entrepreneurs' preferences and diverse needs but also on immigrants' citizenship status. A comparison between this novel approach and existing frameworks in the literature, such as EUCHAM20 (2020) and MIPEX (Solano and Huddleston 2020), reveals similar outcomes, with greater alignment between the EUCHAM20 and IMIGRENT indexes. This similarity likely stems from the financial factors emphasized in both IMIGRENT and EUCHAM20, in contrast to the social and integration-related dimensions prioritized by MIPEX. Notably, the IMIGRENT index introduces additional values highlighted in the comparative analysis of European countries, including the role of immigrant citizenship, national legislation, and other aspects related to personal affairs, accommodation, social services, and climatic conditions in the host country.

The newly introduced IMIGRENT index, together with its underlying methodology, enriches insights from previously discussed theoretical perspectives. It complements blocked opportunity theory, which argues that exclusion from mainstream labor markets often channels immigrants toward entrepreneurship. Furthermore, it extends the mixed embeddedness framework, which situates immigrant entrepreneurship at the intersection of structural economic opportunities and institutional conditions. By incorporating new dimensions such as personal circumstances, housing, access to social services, and environmental factors, the IMIGRENT index offers a more nuanced understanding of immigrants' decision-making processes and their adaptation strategies within host countries.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this research integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches, combining statistical analysis of data from various official sources, including the World Bank, Transparency International (EUCHAM 2020), Policies for Immigrant Integration (Solano and Huddleston 2020), OECD, and Eurostat, among others. To enhance the presentation of findings, the Datawrapper software was utilized for advanced visualization of results.

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The first approach draws on an internationally recognized index developed by the World Bank and Transparency International (EUCHAM 2020). The European Chamber applied this index to rank European countries according to key economic indicators, with particular emphasis on business start-up procedures, tax compliance, cross-border trade, and property registration.

The second approach is based on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), developed by Solano and Huddleston (2020). MIPEX provides a comprehensive analysis of migrant integration by evaluating policies in 56 countries across six continents. It focuses on areas such as labor market mobility, family reunification, education, health, permanent residence, access to citizenship, anti-discrimination measures, and political participation. Within this comparative framework, the study examines the legal and policy environments that shape opportunities for migrant entrepreneurs across the EU and OECD.

Finally, the third and original approach proposed in this article introduces the IMIGRENT index, developed by the author. Designed for global application, the index captures nearly all aspects of establishing entrepreneurial activities abroad. It is structured around six major categories:

- Immigration Procedures,
- Company Registration and Ownership,
- Personal Affairs and Accommodation,
- Social Services,
- Specific Issues,
- Climatic and Natural Conditions.

The novelty and significance of this index lie in its comprehensive scope, which provides an in-depth assessment of the diverse factors that shape immigrant entrepreneurs' ability to successfully establish themselves in a new country. In addition to these core categories, the IMIGRENT index also considers critical aspects such as access to permits and licenses, property ownership rights, access to finance and credit eligibility for loans or grants, anti-discrimination frameworks, and inclusion in entrepreneurship development schemes. Together, these dimensions provide a holistic evaluation of the conditions influencing immigrant entrepreneurship and highlight the multifaceted challenges and opportunities faced by entrepreneurs in host countries.

Local legislation in host countries was essential for conducting this analysis, and primary data sources were employed throughout. For the component of the IMIGRENT index focused on immigration procedures, relevant legislation was obtained from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the immigration departments of each host country. Information regarding company registration and ownership was gathered from the Ministry of Economy and official publications by subject-matter experts. Data on personal affairs and accommodation were sourced from real estate websites. At the same time, information on social services was collected from the Ministries of Social Security in countries where immigrant entrepreneurs seek to settle and establish businesses. Local friendliness scores were drawn from Internations.org (Expat Insider 2022). Finally, data on climatic and natural conditions were accessed through various platforms, including the World Weather Information Service (WMO 2024).

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Computation of the IMIGRENT Index

The purpose of this part is to explain the procedure used to quantify the IMIGRENT index for the EU-27 countries, as well as Iceland and Switzerland. The index is calculated across six blocks, each comprising a series of specific questions listed in the Appendix. Each question contributes to the overall index through two components: a score (0-10) and a weight (0-1).

- Scores are objective. For the first four blocks, Immigration Procedures, Company Registration and Ownership, Personal Affairs and Accommodation, and Social Services, the score is determined by the host country's legislation. For the remaining two blocks, Specific Issues and Climatic and Natural Conditions, the score reflects the country's particular characteristics.
- Weights are subjective. They represent the respondent's personal assessment of each factor's importance, expressing the relative significance an individual entrepreneur attributes to different aspects.

As a result, the overall measure of a country's entrepreneurial attractiveness varies according to how entrepreneurs prioritize these factors. This makes the IMIGRENT index an individually adaptable tool, designed to help potential entrepreneurs identify the host country that best aligns with their preferences, priorities, and personal profile.

For example:

- "Does a foreign citizen need a permit to reside in the country indefinitely?" → No = 10 points; Yes = 0 points
- "Can a foreign citizen work as an individual entrepreneur?" → Yes = 10 points; No = 0 points

Since both questions are highly relevant to business activity, each would typically receive a high weight of 1.

Conversely, for aspects such as language proficiency — for example, "Do at least 50% of local residents speak a foreign language fluently?" → *Yes = 10 points; No = 0 points* — the weight may be lower for respondents who consider this factor less important when deciding where to establish a business.

The overall country score is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Score (country)} = \sum Q_i W_i \qquad (1)$$

where the summation $\sum$ includes all i questions (75 in total, or 25 in the short version), here, Q_i represents the discrete value assigned to each question (0–10 or intermediate), and Wi is the corresponding weight (0–1 or intermediate).

To enable comparison with the other two indexes (EUCHAM 2020 and MIPEX), the maximum achievable score is normalized to 100, providing a standardized measure of a country's attractiveness for entrepreneurship.

The selection of the different aspects was carefully carried out to ensure that all major factors, including legislative, financial, social, and specific elements relevant to immigrants' potential entrepreneurial activity in a host country, were included.

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As explained earlier, data collection and validation were conducted for EU countries, where official electronic publications provide a high level of transparency and accessibility.

It is important to emphasize that the subjectivity involved in assigning weights is not a limitation of the method but rather a strength. This flexibility allows the IMIGRENT index to be adapted to individual profiles and to serve as a personalized tool that helps prospective immigrant entrepreneurs identify the host country that best aligns with their priorities and business goals.

RESULTS

Non-European Immigrants in Europe

When examining immigration in Europe, it is essential to focus on non-European immigrants who have moved to the continent in recent decades. Data from 2011 shows that the top five foreign-born communities in the EU originated from Morocco (2.29 million), Turkey (2.08 million), Russia (1.81 million), Algeria (1.51 million), and Ukraine (1.09 million) (STATISTA 2018).

Due to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as of July 15, 2024, more than 6 million Ukrainians have been resettled in Europe under the temporary protection scheme, which grants them legal status within the EU (EU Protection 2022; UNHCR EU-UA 2023).

The countries that have attracted the largest numbers of non-European immigrants include Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and, before Brexit, the United Kingdom. Figure 1 illustrates the number of immigrants from non-European countries who settled in Europe in 2022, showing that Germany, Spain, France, Italy, and the Netherlands were the primary destinations for non-EU immigrants that year (Eurostat 2024).

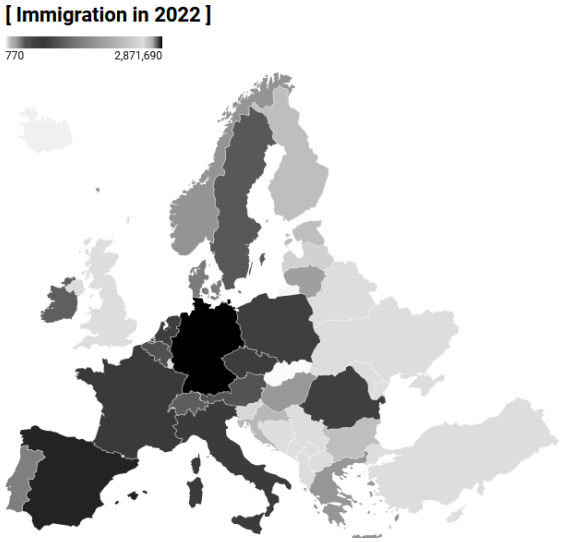

Figure 1: Immigration from Non-EU Countries to the EU, Switzerland, and Norway by 2022 (Source: Eurostat 2023). Author's interactive map published at: https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/WcEbc/2/

EUCHAM20 and MIPEX Scores

The EUCHAM20 Index

In Europe, entrepreneurs operate in a highly competitive market characterized by numerous top-tier brands, long-established companies with centuries of history, and some of the world's most innovative technological and industrial enterprises (Calviño 2022).

Starting a business in the European Union requires meeting specific legal requirements that vary by country, business type, and chosen legal structure, such as a company, limited liability entity, or corporation. Each structure comes with its own prerequisites for lawful operation within the EU.

Entrepreneurs must be adaptable and resilient, capable of navigating the challenges and continual changes that arise throughout the business lifecycle. Successful entrepreneurs maintain a clear focus on their goals, remain committed to their long-term vision, and work diligently to achieve their objectives. Their dedication to continuous learning enables them to adapt to evolving markets and make informed decisions that drive their businesses forward.

A detailed analysis conducted by the European Chamber ranked 46 European countries based on their economic environments. The ranking, which ranges from 0 to 100, was developed through an in-depth assessment using internationally recognized indicators from the World Bank and Transparency International (EUCHAM 2020).

The Nordic countries consistently dominate the top positions in these rankings, with Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland leading the way. Close behind are Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and Germany, reflecting their strong economic environments and favorable business conditions. Estonia, Lithuania, and Georgia stand out among post-Soviet countries for having successfully created business-friendly environments and demonstrating significant progress and economic potential in their regions (Figure 2).

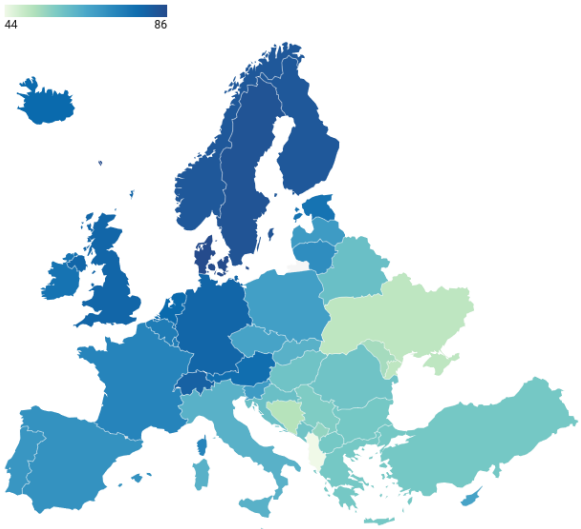

Figure 2: Rank of European Countries for Doing Business in 2020 (Source: EUCHAM 2020). Author's interactive map published at: https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/LW8Rv/1/

The MIPEX Index

In 2020, a comprehensive analysis of immigrant integration policies was published, based on extensive research conducted by multiple research groups across various countries (Solano and Huddleston 2020). The study employed the Immigrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), a tool that evaluates integration policies in 56 countries across six continents. These include all EU Member States (plus the UK), other European nations such as Albania, Iceland, North Macedonia, Moldova, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine, as well as countries in Asia (China, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, UAE), North America (Canada, Mexico, US), South America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile), and additionally South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.

The developers of the policy indicators sought to create a broad, inclusive representation of the opportunities available to immigrants to participate actively in society. These indicators help identify the connections between integration policies, migrant outcomes, and public perceptions. This is particularly relevant when examining preferences for immigrant entrepreneurship, which plays a crucial role in promoting more sustainable resettlement.

In Solano and Huddleston's (2020) publication, three key dimensions are used to define a country's overall approach to integration:

- Fundamental rights: Do immigrants have access to rights comparable to those of nationals? For example, do they enjoy equal rights to work, training, healthcare, and protection against discrimination? This dimension is crucial because it enables long-term planning, including pursuing entrepreneurial activities.
- Equal opportunities: Are immigrants able to access opportunities on par with those available to nationals? For instance, do they receive targeted assistance in areas such as education, healthcare, and political participation to help ensure equal integration with the native population? As with the previous dimension, this aspect is highly relevant for long-term entrepreneurial prospects.
- Secure future: Are immigrants able to establish long-term residence and feel confident about their future in the host country? For example, are they granted access to family reunification, the possibility of obtaining permanent residence, and pathways to citizenship, thereby ensuring greater stability and security? Like the first two dimensions, this factor influences entrepreneurial preferences and contributes to more sustainable settlements across different countries.

The study by Solano and Huddleston (2020) categorizes countries into three groups: comprehensive integration, equality on paper, and temporary integration. The final results, presented in Figure 3, are measured on a scale from 0 to 100. As shown, the highest overall scores are found in the Nordic countries and Portugal, followed by Belgium, which outperforms most other European nations. In contrast, Poland, several Baltic and Balkan countries, and Turkey appear at the lower end of the scale.

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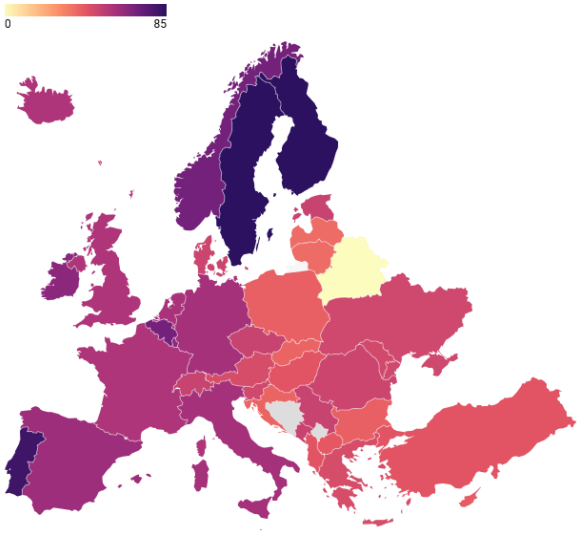

Figure 3: European Migrant Integration 2020 (Source: Solano and Huddleston 2020).
Author's interactive map published at: https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/YbFri/2/

The IMIGRENT Index

The following part presents a new approach to quantifying the attractiveness of a given country for entrepreneurial activities worldwide, proposed by the author: the IMIGRENT index (Immigrant Entrepreneurship Index), introduced in 2024. This represents the first instance of such a comprehensive measure, integrating in-depth analysis with the incorporation of personal preferences and attitudes toward the various criteria used to assess a country's entrepreneurial attractiveness.

As outlined in the Introduction, the index is based on a comprehensive set of criteria grouped into six main categories:

- Immigration procedures, including residence permits, processing timeframes, work permits, recognition of foreign diplomas or qualifications, pathways to citizenship, and related procedures.
- Company registration and ownership, covering factors such as the freedom to conduct business, tax procedures, the ability to direct one's own company, opportunities for individual entrepreneurship, and similar considerations.
- Personal affairs and accommodation, including the ability of foreigners to purchase real estate, foreign language requirements, bringing a personal vehicle into the country, recognition of driving licenses, and other practical matters.
- Social services encompass access to healthcare and pension systems for foreigners, education, and other public services.
- Specific issues, such as anti-discrimination measures, crime indices, risks related to armed conflict and terrorism, and kidnapping risk.
- Climatic and natural conditions, including environmental quality, geological and climatic hazard risks, risks of malaria and other diseases, air pollution levels, and related factors.

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As explained in the Methodology section, each block contains several specific questions, each assigned a value (0, 5, 10, or an intermediate value between 0 and 10) along with its own weight ranging from 0 to 1. Each question corresponds to the national legislation of the country under evaluation and includes a link to the relevant institutional source. The legislation itself determines the numerical value (0–10), while the weight is subjective and depends on how important an individual considers each aspect to be.

In this way, the overall assessment of a country's attractiveness for entrepreneurship depends on the entrepreneur's own priorities and on the degree of importance they assign to the various criteria.

IMIGRENT Index for EU Immigrants in the EU-27, Iceland, and Switzerland

For clarity, the Appendix presents the 25 key questions used in the reduced analysis. These questions were selected based on their significance to the author, with each assigned an equal weight of one. Figure 4 illustrates how these questions are applied across different European countries, taking into account national legislation and the author's criteria for a hypothetical EU-citizen entrepreneur (Koroutchev 2024).

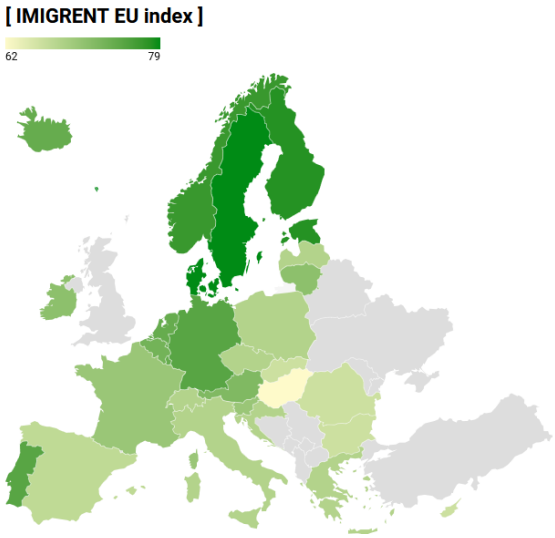

Figure 4: The IMIGRENT Index for the European Scenario.
Author's interactive map published at: https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/7mlv1/4/

As shown in Figure 4, the Nordic countries, along with Estonia, achieve the highest scores among nations. Portugal, Germany, and Ireland follow them. The Netherlands, Belgium, and Austria also rank relatively high, while most Southern and Eastern European countries display similar but lower scores.

The IMIGRENT Index enhances quantification by incorporating a broader range of factors compared to EUCHAM20 or the MIPEX indices (see Table 1). Elements such as company registration processes, online accessibility of administrative services, personal affairs, accommodation conditions, and natural or environmental factors allow for a more nuanced

assessment. For example, Finland's score reflects the influence of its harsh climate, whereas Spain ranks lower due to institutional inefficiencies and unclear regulatory procedures. In Germany, the results are generally positive, although some indirect economic barriers remain.

Portugal performs well due to its flexible banking and business regulations, a welcoming population, a favorable climate, and an efficient public administration. In contrast, Hungary scores lower because of restrictions on property purchases, limitations on the use of foreign driver's licenses, and reduced access to social services, despite maintaining business-friendly banking regulations. Poland benefits from similarly flexible banking rules but ranks higher than Hungary because it has a stronger social support system. Italy's lower score is attributable mainly to bureaucratic complexity and additional requirements for recognizing foreign diplomas, whereas France, despite lagging in e-services, offers greater overall flexibility.

The IMIGRENT Index for Non-EU Immigrants in the EU

The questions presented in the Appendix were used to calculate the IMIGRENT index for non-EU immigrants in the EU. Notable differences appear in the index values for various European countries compared to those for EU immigrants. The results are shown in Figure 5. The scores were calculated for a generic non-EU immigrant seeking to establish activities in the EU, without accounting for specific bilateral agreements between countries.

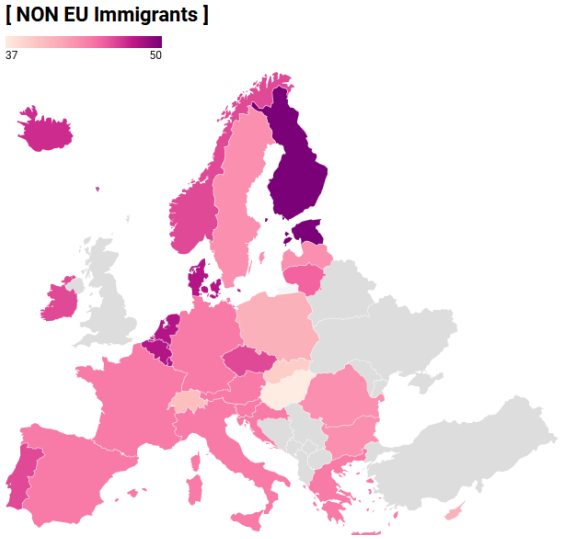

Figure 5: The IMIGRENT Index for the European Scenario: The Case of Non-EU Immigrants.
Author's interactive map published at: https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/4llx5/4/

In Table 1 below, the countries' scores can be compared across the different approaches and for both EU and non-EU immigrants who wish to establish themselves as entrepreneurs in the EU. Note that the United Kingdom and Ukraine were excluded from the IMIGRENT index analysis in this case. Because of the significance of the 25 questions, selected according to the author's criteria and their relevance to this study (see Appendix), each question was assigned an equal weight of one.

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Table 1: Comparison of the Three Indices: EUCHAM2020, MIPEX, and IMIGRENT* (Source: Author's own depiction).

Countries	EUCHAM20	MIPEX	IMIGRENT EU	IMIGRENT NON-EU
Denmark	86	49	**79**	**48**
Sweden	84	85	**79**	**43**
Estonia	77	50	**78**	**50**
Finland	83	85	**78**	**50**
Norway	83	69	**77**	**46**
Germany	80	58	**75**	**44**
Portugal	69	81	**75**	**46**
Iceland	79	56	**74**	**47**
Luxemburg	75	64	**74**	**48**
Netherlands	79	57	**74**	**48**
UK	80	56	-	-
Belgium	75	69	**73**	**48**
Austria	78	46	**72**	**44**
Ireland	77	64	**71**	**46**
Lithuania	71	37	**71**	**45**
France	73	56	**70**	**44**
Slovenia	68	48	**70**	**44**
Croatia	60	39	**68**	**44**
Czech Republic	66	50	**68**	**46**
Greece	58	46	**68**	**44**
Italy	63	58	**68**	**44**
Latvia	68	37	**68**	**43**
Poland	67	40	**68**	**41**
Switzerland	79	56	**68**	**40**
Bulgaria	58	40	**66**	**43**
Cyprus	66	41	**66**	**41**
Romania	59	49	**66**	**43**
Slovakia	63	39	**66**	**39**
Spain	70	60	**66**	**44**
Hungary	59	43	**62**	**37**
Ukraine	50	48	**-**	**-**

** The last two columns show the position of the countries based on the author's calculated IMIGRENT scores for both EU and non-EU immigrants.*

As an illustration, the calculation for Estonia is presented in more detail below.

The first six questions from the Appendix belong to the block on Immigration Procedures. Based on information from the Ministry of the Interior of Estonia (2025), the following were quantified: Q1 = 0, Q2 = 10, Q3 = 10, Q4 = 0, Q5 = 10, and Q6 = 0. It should be recalled that, according to the author's criteria, the corresponding weights (W_i) are all set to 1.

These scores reflect the fact that non-EU immigrants require a pre-arranged visa for entry and do not pay intermediaries for services. Additionally, a residence permit is required for indefinite stays, and although a work residence permit is necessary, employment is generally allowed.

Questions 7 through 14, referring to Company Registration and Ownership, were evaluated using information from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications of Estonia (2025). They were quantified as follows: Q7 = 10, Q8 = 10, Q9 = 10, Q10 = 0, Q11 = 10, Q12 = 0, Q13 = 0, and Q14 = 0.

In practice, non-EU immigrants can freely conduct business in Estonia, and the country provides extensive online services to support business needs. Non-EU citizens may act as directors of their companies and may apply to work as entrepreneurs. However, they face stricter banking requirements and must obtain a residence permit.

The next block, referring to Personal Affairs and Accommodation, is quantified using information from sources related to property ownership in Estonia (Ownership Property Estonia 2024). The scores for the corresponding four questions are as follows: Q15 = 5, Q16 = 0, Q17 = 0, and Q18 = 10. Foreigners can purchase property without restrictions, and a significant portion of Estonians, especially in urban areas, speak English.

The scores for the Social Services block, based on information from the Social Insurance Board of Estonia (2025), are as follows: Q19 = 10 and Q20 = 10. Once registered and contributing to the social system, non-EU immigrants gain access to healthcare; however, eligibility for pensions depends on the duration of contributions and length of stay.

Finally, the last two blocks, Specific Issues (questions 21–23) and Climatic and Other Natural Conditions (questions 24–25), are based on the sources cited previously, namely Expat Insider (2022) and WMO (2024). The corresponding scores are: Q21 = 5, Q22 = 5, Q23 = 2, Q24 = 0, and Q25 = 8.

The application of Equation (1) results in a total of 50 points out of a maximum normalized score of 250 (equivalent to 100 points).

This IMIGRENT index value for non-EU immigrants in Estonia is shown in the interactive map available at [https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/4llx5/3/]. These scores reflect that, although Estonia is welcoming to skilled immigrants, integration can present challenges, and that the country has a relatively low crime rate. It should also be noted that average temperatures, sunshine hours, and humidity levels are not ideal year-round. The calculations for the other countries presented in Table 1 are based on institutions comparable to those used for the Republic of Estonia.

To explore statistical relationships among the indices, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for each pair (Freedman et al. 2007; Correlation Coefficient Calculator). The correlation between EUCHAM20 and IMIGRENT EU is 0.8435, while that between MIPEX and IMIGRENT EU is lower, at 0.6394. The stronger relationship between EUCHAM20 and IMIGRENT EU likely reflects the greater emphasis on economic factors in both indices, in contrast to MIPEX's more socially oriented focus (Koroutchev 2024).

Similarly, the correlations between EUCHAM20 and IMIGRENT NON-EU, and between MIPEX and IMIGRENT NON-EU, are 0.5449 and 0.4737, respectively, again showing a higher association for EUCHAM20. The lower correlations between EUCHAM20 and MIPEX, and between EUCHAM20 and the IMIGRENT NON-EU index, are due to significant differences in how EU and non-EU immigrants are treated, as captured by EUCHAM20 and MIPEX. However, the latter aims to promote equal treatment for non-EU immigrants in line with the rights afforded to EU citizens within the EU framework. A similar pattern to that observed for EU immigrants emerges: EUCHAM20 and IMIGRENT NON-EU show a stronger relationship than MIPEX does.

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DISCUSSION

The IMIGRENT index, applied in this article to the case of non-EU immigrant entrepreneurs, provides a new and comprehensive measure of the conditions for starting an entrepreneurial activity in a foreign country within the EU. Although the present analysis emphasizes the European context, the index is designed to be universal, applicable to any country and to entrepreneurs of all nationalities, as shown in this case for non-EU immigrants. By integrating a wide range of factors related to immigrant integration in host countries, it enables meaningful comparisons with two established indices, EUCHAM20 and MIPEX, while offering a broader perspective on entrepreneurial attractiveness.

The analysis shows that the three approaches produce broadly similar results for EU immigrants. However, the MIPEX index appears more strongly correlated with the IMIGRENT index for non-EU immigrants. At the same time, the IMIGRENT index adds valuable dimensions that refine the assessment. It accounts for factors such as company registration procedures, availability of online services, personal affairs, accommodation, and natural conditions. When analyzing the core components of the three approaches, it becomes evident that EUCHAM20 and the IMIGRENT index share similar economic and administrative elements. At the same time, MIPEX is more strongly oriented toward integration and adaptation policies, which are particularly relevant for assessing the situation of non-EU immigrants.

Regarding the specific issues included in the IMIGRENT index, climatic conditions in countries such as Finland and Estonia are notable factors that lower their overall scores. In Spain, weak institutions and unclear rules also reduce the score, whereas Germany performs well overall despite some remaining economic barriers. Italy's lower ranking reflects slow bureaucratic procedures and additional steps required for the recognition of foreign diplomas. France, although weaker in e-services, offers greater flexibility than Italy. Denmark and Sweden remain among the top performers, although property restrictions and harsh weather conditions slightly reduce their scores.

As a general observation, the analysis above shows that the Nordic countries, Estonia, Germany, Portugal, Iceland, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands occupy the top 10 positions in both cases of EU and non-EU immigrants. At the same time, Hungary consistently ranks last in Europe for starting a business.

As noted previously, the assigned weight is subjective and depends on the importance attributed to different aspects. Thus, the overall evaluation of a country's attractiveness for entrepreneurship varies according to entrepreneurs' individual interests and how they value each factor. The 25 key questions used in the simplified version of the analysis were selected by the author for their personal relevance, which is why each was assigned a weight of 1. It should be acknowledged, however, that assigning equal weight to all factors may not fully reflect entrepreneurs' general priorities. Nevertheless, this approach provides a sufficiently accurate overall picture of the issue. Moreover, while changing conditions and policies could alter the results over time, such changes typically occur gradually and usually do not significantly affect the assessment within a reasonable time frame.

Specific policy recommendations for lower-scoring countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, could focus on improving procedures for company registration and ownership, as well as for personal affairs and accommodation. These challenges often arise from limited flexibility

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in areas such as fully electronic accessibility, permissions for individual entrepreneurship, and real estate procedures, among others.

It is also helpful to rank the leading countries by each set of criteria within the six main categories. For non-EU immigrants in the EU, the results closely mirror those observed for EU immigrants:

- Immigration Procedures: Denmark, Sweden, Estonia.
- Company Registration and Ownership: Denmark, Estonia, Finland.
- Personal Affairs and Accommodation: Estonia, Denmark, Ireland.
- Social Services: Germany, Belgium, France.
- Specific Issues: Portugal, Spain, Estonia.
- Climatic and Natural Conditions: Croatia, Greece, Italy.

It should be noted that these results are based on a selected set of questions that, according to the author, carry the highest weight. However, the IMIGRENT index is built on a broader set of 75 questions, and including all items may alter the rankings. This extended analysis will be necessary for a more complete understanding of entrepreneurial decision-making. A comprehensive study will be presented in a future publication, covering both EU and non-EU entrepreneurs who wish to start a business in Europe.

To conclude, the following section examines the implications of the results and the proposed methodology for EU migration and entrepreneurship policies. Unlike frameworks such as MIPEX, which primarily assess legal, civic, and social integration, the IMIGRENT index focuses on structural factors that facilitate entrepreneurial activity, including company registration procedures, residence and citizenship regulations, housing availability, and environmental conditions. As an emerging analytical tool, it shifts EU migration policy toward capability-oriented integration, framing entrepreneurship as a pathway to social inclusion. Its application, refinement, or broader adoption at the EU level could help reconcile economic migration governance with integration policies, thereby supporting the Union's goal of fostering socially cohesive and innovation-driven mobility.

The IMIGRENT index provides national governments with a multidimensional tool for evaluating their relative attractiveness to migrant entrepreneurs. Beyond serving as a descriptive comparative measure, it can guide strategic planning, regulatory reform, and policy assessment within national migration and entrepreneurship agendas. In this way, the index functions not merely as a metric but as a diagnostic framework that helps align economic and migration policy objectives. Each component of the IMIGRENT index corresponds to a concrete policy domain. Ministries of economy or trade can use it to simplify company registration procedures and reduce administrative barriers for foreign founders. Ministries of interior and justice may reform residence and citizenship pathways to support long-term entrepreneurial participation. At the same time, housing and environmental authorities can ensure that urban and ecological infrastructures foster a business-friendly environment.

The EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 (European Commission 2020a) establishes a comprehensive framework to promote social cohesion and equal participation for migrants and EU citizens with a migrant background. Its four priority areas, education and training, employment and skills, health and access to services, and active participation and inclusion, address integration barriers through targeted support, skills

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recognition, encouragement of entrepreneurship, and facilitation of social interaction between communities. While the Action Plan is primarily oriented toward social inclusion, the IMIGRENT index provides a complementary, economically focused perspective by assessing how institutional, environmental, and legal conditions shape entrepreneurial inclusion within host societies. Integrating insights from the IMIGRENT index into the Action Plan's monitoring architecture could strengthen policy coherence and enhance evidence-based evaluation.

From the other side, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission 2023) represents the EU's effort to establish a comprehensive, sustainable, and solidarity-based framework for migration governance. While the Pact primarily addresses asylum procedures, border management, and responsibility sharing among EU Member States, it also introduces an important forward-looking economic and integration dimension. The Pact emphasizes that migration should not only be managed but also shaped as a lever for growth, skills development, and innovation within the European economy.

In this context, the IMIGRENT index provides a valuable analytical tool for translating these policy goals into measurable outcomes. By quantifying the institutional, legal, and environmental conditions that enable migrant entrepreneurship, the IMIGRENT index complements the Pact's focus on legal pathways and skills partnerships. It helps operationalize the EU's aspiration for a more opportunity-oriented migration system.

Finally, the EU SME Strategy for a Sustainable and Digital Europe (European Commission 2020b) sets out a vision to empower small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as the backbone of the European economy while driving the twin transitions toward sustainability and digitalization. Within this framework, migrant entrepreneurship represents a crucial yet often underexplored source of innovation, resilience, and cross-border competitiveness.

The IMIGRENT index, by systematically evaluating the institutional and environmental conditions that shape migrants' entrepreneurial experience, offers a valuable analytical lens for aligning national and EU-level SME policies. It enables policymakers to identify where supportive ecosystems for migrant entrepreneurs align with, or diverge from, the objectives of the EU SME Strategy.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the factors that determine the attractiveness of different countries for entrepreneurial activity and proposes a comprehensive framework for assessing it. Building on internationally recognized indicators from the World Bank, Transparency International, and the MIPEX Index, the study introduces the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Index (IMIGRENT) as a new tool for evaluating the business environment from the perspective of immigrant entrepreneurs. By incorporating detailed elements related to company registration, personal documentation, accommodation, administrative procedures, and natural conditions, and by integrating country-specific legal requirements, the IMIGRENT index provides a more nuanced and accurate assessment of entrepreneurial opportunities.

The comparative analysis of IMIGRENT scores for EU and non-EU immigrants shows that differences primarily stem from host-country legislation and the entrepreneur's legal status. Nevertheless, countries that rank highest for EU immigrants also tend to rank highest for non-EU immigrants, and those with the lowest scores remain consistently at the bottom. This

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consistency suggests that the index is a reliable measure of entrepreneurial attractiveness across different migrant categories. Ultimately, a country's suitability for entrepreneurial activity depends on entrepreneurs' individual priorities and preferences.

Beyond measuring economic conditions, this study emphasizes that immigrant entrepreneurship is a meaningful lens for evaluating broader issues of liberty, equality, and human rights. By positioning the IMIGRENT index as both a technical indicator and a policy-assessment tool, the analysis illustrates how legal frameworks, access to permits, property rights, anti-discrimination protections, and institutional support systems collectively shape immigrants' ability to exercise economic freedom and achieve social inclusion. The findings underscore that entrepreneurial outcomes are deeply connected to institutional and policy structures, revealing both opportunities and constraints in realizing fundamental rights (IOM 5 Keys 2025).

Finally, the study highlights key policy recommendations to ensure equal entrepreneurial opportunities regardless of citizenship status. Streamlining licensing, registration, and permit procedures can help immigrants gain equitable access to legal and administrative channels. Strong enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation in financial services, public procurement, and business support programs is essential. Embedding a human-rights approach ensures that entrepreneurship functions not only as an economic activity but also as a vehicle for safeguarding migrants' rights and promoting social justice. Public and community-based funding mechanisms, including microloans, grants, and low-interest credit, should be made accessible to immigrant entrepreneurs. At the same time, financial inclusion policies must confront structural biases in private lending. Recognizing foreign credentials and professional experience allows immigrants to fully utilize their human capital, fostering efficiency, innovation, and meaningful integration. Coordinating support for immigrant entrepreneurship with labor-market integration, social services, and regional development strategies maximizes both economic contributions and social cohesion, reinforcing the developmental potential of migration. Although the IMIGRENT index contains an element of subjectivity, having been designed around the entrepreneur's own perspectives and criteria, this does not necessarily constitute a limitation of the study. Potential limitations include the scarcity of comparable datasets and the absence of survey data from entrepreneurs already established in a given country.

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APPENDIX

1) Immigration Procedures

Q[1] 1_1 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Is immigration possible?
Is a visa or similar pre-arranged permit needed for entry as a visitor for a short stay (less than 30 days)?

- If no visa or pre-arranged permit is needed → **10 points**
- If a visa on arrival is needed with no supporting documents or pre-arranged procedure, → **7 points**
- If a pre-arranged travel permit (US ESTA, Australian ETA, EU ETIAS, etc.) is needed → **5 points**
- If an e-visa before arrival is needed → **3 points**
- If a sticker visa obtained through a consulate or visa agency is required → **0 points**

Q[2] 1_2 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Are the immigration procedures clear?
A clear official website exists where the user can understand the entire process in under 20 minutes, and all procedures are available in a major international language.

- If yes → **10 points**
- If no (or if information is available only in the local language and requires up to 1 hour) → **3 points**
- Otherwise → **0 points**

Q[3] 1_3 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Does the applicant have to pay to access the immigration authorities or obtain a positive outcome? (e.g., being unable to get an appointment unless intermediaries are used)

- If no → **10 points**
- If yes → **0 points**

Q[4] 1_4 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Does a foreign citizen need a permit to stay in the country indefinitely?
Border runs that allow renewal of stay count as "no permit needed."

- If no → **10 points**
- If yes → **0 points**

Q[5] 1_5 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Is a foreign citizen allowed to work?

- Allowed as both employee and self-employed → **10 points**
- Allowed only in one category → **5 points**
- Not allowed → **0 points**

Q[6] 1_6 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Is recognition of foreign-issued diplomas or qualifications necessary?

- If no → **10 points**
- If yes → **0 points**

2) Company Registration and Ownership

Q[7] 2_1 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to statistics
Is it possible to freely carry out business activities without being hindered, racketeered, or blackmailed (including unofficial means or positive discrimination) by government or competitors?

- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

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- Intermediate values possible

Q[8] 2_2 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Is it possible to complete the vast majority of paperwork online?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

Q[9] 2_3 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Can a foreign citizen obtain a digital signature to conduct all professional and personal transactions under similar conditions as local citizens?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

Q[10] 2_4 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Can a non-resident foreign citizen open a bank account and carry out transactions under the same conditions as local citizens?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

Q[11] 2_5 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Can a foreign citizen be a director of his or her own company?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

Q[12] 2_6 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Does a foreign citizen need a work or residence permit to be a director of his or her own company?
- If no → **10 points**
- If yes → **0 points**
- Intermediate values are possible if restrictions exist

Q[13] 2_7 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Is a foreign citizen allowed to work as an individual entrepreneur and reside in the country on that basis?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

Q[14] 2_8 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
If yes, is a work permit required?
- If no → **10 points**
- If yes (or if individual entrepreneurship is not permitted) → **0 points**

3) Personal Affairs and Accommodation

Q[15] 3_1 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Can a foreign citizen buy real estate?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**
- Intermediate values are possible if restrictions apply

Q[16] 3_2 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Are foreigners residing in the country allowed to drive indefinitely using their foreign driver's license?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

Q[17] 3_3 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Is it possible to drive a vehicle registered abroad while residing in the country?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

Q[18] 3_4 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to statistics
Do at least 50% of local people speak English at a conversational level?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

4) Social Services

Q[19] 4_1 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Are resident foreigners allowed access to healthcare under the same conditions as citizens?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

Q[20] 4_2 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to legislation
Are foreigners allowed to receive a pension under the same conditions as citizens?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

5) Specific Issues

Q[21] 5_1 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to statistics
Are foreigners welcome?
- If yes → **10 points**
- If no → **0 points**

Q[22] 5_2 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to statistics
Crime index
- Minimum = 0
- Maximum = 10

Q[23] 5_3 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to statistics
Is the country at war, at risk of war, or affected by significant terrorist groups?
- If no → **10 points**
- If yes → **0 points**
- Intermediate values possible

6) Climatic and Other Natural Conditions

Q[24] 6_1 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to statistics
Climatic comfort:
- Average monthly temperature below 15°C or above 30°C → **0 points**; otherwise → **4 points**
- Average monthly sunshine hours below 120 or above 360 → **0 points**; otherwise → **3 points**
- Average monthly relative humidity below 45% or above 65% → **0 points**; otherwise → **3 points**

Q[25] 6_2 — Weight: Your preference × Points according to statistics
Endemic illnesses (e.g., malaria, dengue, or other serious or fatal endemic diseases)
- If no → **10 points**
- If yes → **0 points**

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Strategic Hedging in a Multipolar World: Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Transformation Under "Vision 2030"

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Abstract
This paper employs hedging theory to examine the significant transformation in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Drawing on triangulated sources, it analyzes Riyadh's deliberate effort to maintain strong security ties with Western partners while simultaneously cultivating broad new security relationships with key Eastern actors. The study highlights how this hedging strategy increasingly prioritizes economic and technological cooperation with non-traditional partners, particularly China. Notably, the paper argues that Saudi hedging is not a fixed or static policy but a dynamic, adaptive process shaped by pragmatic, incremental adjustments. These adjustments serve as a strategic bridge, enabling the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to respond effectively to shifting geopolitical conditions and expand its influence in an evolving international environment.

Keywords
Hedging; Saudi Arabia; Foreign Policy; Mohammed bin Salman; Security Relations; China; Geopolitical Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed turbulent global developments. The shockwaves triggered by COVID-19 and volatility in global energy markets are just two examples frequently cited by analysts to illustrate ongoing economic instability (World Bank 2022). Several authors have highlighted inconsistent commitment by US policymakers to multilateral frameworks, alongside a heightened focus on domestic politics in Washington, D.C., which they argue reflects a relative decline in American international leadership (Walt 2018; Haass 2020). During the same period, great-power politics have been reshaped by major economic shifts, most notably China's growing global influence and the rising activism of other states (Allison 2017). Within this broader politico-institutional context, long-standing international institutions, such as the UN Security Council and the World Trade Organization, have increasingly been viewed as ineffective or challenged compared to earlier periods (Ikenberry 2020).

Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia began implementing substantial reforms in its foreign policy, with significant implications for great-power security dynamics. These shifts have been driven by both global and domestic factors, with their roots traceable to the launch of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's "Vision 2030" in 2016 (Kinninmont 2017). Although initially framed as a technological and societal reform agenda, "Vision 2030" carries important consequences for resource allocation and Saudi foreign policy priorities. Analysts have noted that Riyadh has taken notable steps to diversify its international partnerships, deepen

engagement with China and other Asian countries, and reduce what many describe as a historic "overreliance" on the United States (Ulrichsen 2017; Blanchard 2021).

Saudi Arabia is seeking to deepen its East-oriented trade relationships while simultaneously maintaining US-centered security ties under MBS's leadership. In addition, the Kingdom aims to strengthen its influence through a more active role in multilateral institutions and by addressing regional security issues more directly, anticipating the rise of a multipolar world in which power is distributed among many states (Vakil 2025).

Saudi Arabia's ambitious state-led reform program, "Vision 2030," is designed to transform the nation's economy, society, and international standing. In response to an evolving global order, the Kingdom seeks a prosperous and resilient future by diversifying its economic base, reducing dependence on oil revenues, improving public services, and promoting sustainable development. As "Vision 2030" aims to attract substantial foreign direct investment, a more globally engaged Saudi Arabia is taking shape, one that promotes stronger international partnerships, enhanced regional stability, and greater strategic autonomy (Alshehri 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In recent years, hedging theory has gained increasing attention in the field of international relations. Scholars have used it to explain how smaller states respond safely to significant shifts in the international system. To protect their interests, states must continually balance cooperation and competition in order to maximize their strategic options. Following the Cold War, the formerly US-dominated unipolar system has gradually evolved into a more decentralized, multi-layered order, requiring states to make difficult trade-offs between engaging and competing with major powers.

In an environment defined by uncertainty, the question of how states can maintain an effective balance between cooperation and caution remains central to contemporary international relations theory (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019). Against this backdrop, hedging offers a valuable lens for understanding how states manage multiple motivations and employ flexible strategies amid renewed great-power competition.

Conceptual Foundations of Hedging Theory

Kuik (2020) describes hedging as an act of seeking "insurance," in which a state reduces external risks while avoiding the political and strategic costs of fully aligning with any side. Unlike balancing or bandwagoning, hedging is an intermediate strategy that maintains strategic autonomy in an uncertain international system through a combination of policies. Its core principle is risk diversification: a state engages simultaneously with several great powers to gain economic and security benefits without becoming overly dependent on or entangled with any single actor. Although Kuik draws on neorealist logic (Waltz 1979), his framework emphasizes national sovereignty and strategic choice, particularly for small and medium-sized states.

Goh (2005), in his analysis of Australia and Southeast Asian diplomacy, argued that hedging provides medium-sized states, which cannot ensure security through military power alone, a practical and realistic way to safeguard their interests. Such states employ selective engagement, appeasement, and measured opposition to maintain strategic flexibility and allow

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rapid adjustment to global changes. Similarly, Haacke (2003) observed that even before "hedging" became a common term in international relations, ASEAN countries had already achieved regional autonomy through consensual decision-making, economic cooperation, and diversified diplomatic linkages.

This theoretical perspective was further developed by Ciorciari and Haacke (2019), who describe hedging as a "two-legged" approach: actively reducing reliance on any single power while simultaneously maintaining cooperative ties with major states. They emphasize that hedging is an act of engagement rather than avoidance and should not be confused with neutrality or non-alignment. In this sense, hedging represents a proactive and flexible strategic mindset rather than a passive or negative stance. Studies of rising powers confirm this view; for example, Medeiros (2005) notes that China's foreign policy in the early 2000s exhibited precise hedging toward the US, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

Evolution and Expansion of Hedging in Global Politics

Ciorciari and Haacke (2019) elaborated on this concept, describing hedging as a "two-track" strategy that involves actively protecting against vulnerability to any single power while maintaining cooperative relationships with major states. They emphasize that hedging is not a strategy of avoidance but one of engagement, and it should not be confused with non-alignment or a lack of interest. In this sense, hedging is not merely reactive; it can also be flexible and proactive.

This perspective also applies to the study of emerging powers. Medeiros (2005) observes that, in the early 2000s, China's foreign policy exhibited clear features of hedging toward multiple states, including the US, Japan, and Southeast Asian nations. China sought to enhance its strategic resilience while simultaneously engaging with and accommodating other powers.

Hedging and Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy Transformation

On one hand, Saudi Arabia's strategic diversification policy is evident in the foreign policy turnaround spearheaded by MBS. Ulrichsen (2017) and Gause (2024) argue that "Vision 2030," championed by MBS, is more than an economic reform blueprint; it represents a process of geostrategic transformation. Its central goal is to reduce dependence on the West while expanding ties with Asian countries and other global partners. Hertog (2024) highlights that "Vision 2030's" diversification objectives are concretely reflected in Saudi Arabia's diplomatic practices, particularly in cooperative initiatives with China in science and technology, infrastructure, and renewable energy. Lippman (2017) notes that Saudi Arabia's engagement with non-Western partners reflects a pragmatic diplomatic recalibration that closely aligns with MBS's vision of establishing Saudi Arabia as a regionally autonomous power.

Research on the transformation of Saudi diplomacy has largely overlooked the insights of hedging theory. Most studies remain within traditional realist frameworks, emphasizing either balancing or bandwagoning strategies (Waltz 1979; Walt 1987). These approaches struggle to explain how Saudi Arabia can simultaneously deepen relations with China and Russia while maintaining security cooperation with the United States. From a conventional balance-of-power perspective, such multi-directional diplomacy may appear contradictory or opportunistic.

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However, from the hedging perspective, it represents a rational strategy: Saudi Arabia seeks to preserve strategic autonomy through flexible engagement in an uncertain international environment.

Bridging Theoretical and Empirical Gaps

This paper seeks to address this theoretical gap by applying the perspective of hedging to the analysis of MBS's diplomatic reforms in Saudi Arabia. As discussed, Saudi Arabia's diplomatic practices, aimed at economic diversification, maintaining security flexibility, and pursuing multilateral balance, exhibit clear hedging behavior. While strengthening ties with China, Russia, and other Asian nations, Saudi Arabia continues to uphold its traditional security partnership with the United States. This approach is not paradoxical; rather, it represents a multifaceted strategy designed to exert influence and navigate a competition-polarized international environment (Bakir and Al-Shamari 2025).

In short, the central objective of this thesis is to examine Saudi Arabia's diplomatic transformation under MBS through the lens of hedging. From a theoretical perspective, this demonstrates that hedging is not confined to Asian states; medium-sized nations such as Saudi Arabia adjust their diplomacy in response to global developments, adapting rather than completely overhauling their approach.

Overall, Saudi Arabia's actions in the multipolar era are better understood as hedging rather than traditional balancing. As Bakir and Al-Shamari (2025) note, hedging represents a sophisticated strategic approach that manages uncertainty by engaging with multiple major powers simultaneously while maintaining flexibility. Using this framework, MBS's diplomacy can be interpreted as a deliberate, logical strategy employed by a medium-sized state to survive and gain influence within the complex dynamics of the twenty-first century, rather than as a series of ad hoc decisions. Given the Middle East's high interdependence, asymmetric alliances, and regional instability, conditions comparable to those that initially prompted hedging behavior in Southeast Asia, the logic of hedging readily applies to the Saudi context.

METHODS

This paper employs a qualitative case study approach to examine changes in Saudi foreign policy under the "Vision 2030" framework through the lens of hedging theory. The research draws on multiple sources, including official documents, MBS's public speeches, policy statements, and analytical reports from think tanks and academic literature. To trace the trajectory of Saudi policy within the broader global context, such as the relative decline of US influence and the rise of China, this study uses process tracing to identify the logic and sequence of key policy decisions.

To enhance the reliability and transparency of the research, source triangulation is applied. This involves cross-checking information from official records, academic studies, and mainstream media reports to ensure the robustness and credibility of the analysis and its conclusions.

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CASE STUDY: STRATEGIC CHOICES FOR MBS

Within the framework of "Vision 2030," Saudi Arabia is realigning its diplomatic orientation, reducing its reliance on oil revenues, and seeking greater space for independent action in international affairs. MBS has repeatedly emphasized that these changes respond to shifts in the global landscape, particularly the intensifying competition between China and the United States and the uncertainty of the regional environment (Alterman 2020). His diplomatic approach reflects a hedging strategy: while maintaining a long-term and stable security partnership with the United States, he simultaneously deepens political and economic ties with China, Russia, and the increasingly important India (Gause 2024).

Since MBS assumed power, cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China in the energy sector has accelerated significantly. The two countries have not only signed additional long-term crude oil supply agreements but have also invested in refining and chemical projects in China (Blanchard 2023). Building on this foundation, MBS has promoted new collaboration in science, technology, and security, such as working with Huawei to develop a 5G network and exploring potential defense cooperation (Fulton 2019).

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has maintained its relationship with the United States. Riyadh remains one of the US's largest arms purchasers, signing multibillion-dollar contracts annually and sustaining close cooperation in intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism operations (Bruno and Karmon 2016). This simultaneous deepening of relations with both China and the United States exemplifies Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy: in an environment of rising great-power competition and uncertainty, Riyadh diversifies risks through multifaceted diplomacy while seeking greater strategic maneuverability (Kuik 2008; Luft 2023).

However, this approach carries potential risks. Ambiguity in foreign policy can unsettle allies, particularly the United States, which has expressed concern over Saudi Arabia's growing engagement with China (Al-Saud and Kéchichian 2020). As competition between China and the United States escalates, it may become increasingly complex for Saudi Arabia to maintain this balance, potentially forcing the Kingdom to choose between the two. This tension encapsulates the essence of Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy: it provides flexibility and autonomy, but it also tests the trust and patience of its partners.

This hedging strategy, despite its challenges, is having a wide-ranging impact. As a result of MBS's diplomatic approach, Saudi Arabia now exerts greater influence within the Gulf Cooperation Council. Beyond playing a key role in mediating disputes in countries such as Sudan and Yemen, the Kingdom has made significant strides in easing tensions with Iran.

At the global level, this strategy allows Saudi Arabia to gradually shed the image of an oil-dependent state and emerge as a medium-power actor capable of navigating a multipolar world more flexibly. By proactively engaging in the energy market, international investment, and emerging technology governance, Saudi Arabia can participate more independently in global competition and cooperation and diversify its economy (Barzegar 2023).

Recalibrating the US Alliance: Stability Without Dependence

Within the framework of "Vision 2030," Saudi Arabia is actively adjusting its diplomatic approach, not only to reduce dependence on oil revenues but also to achieve greater autonomy

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in international affairs. MBS has repeatedly emphasized that, amid an increasingly complex global environment, Saudi Arabia must prioritize its national interests. Alterman (2024) notes that this policy shift is closely linked to intensifying competition between China and the United States and to growing uncertainty in the regional security environment.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia's strategic position between China and the United States exemplifies classic hedging behavior: it maintains a long-term security partnership with the United States while simultaneously deepening economic and political ties with China, Russia, India, and other countries. Taking China as an example, Duan and Aldamer (2022) argue that, in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, Saudi–China relations reflect a combination of economic pragmatism and hedging: they are neither detached from the United States nor confined to a single cooperative framework. This represents a comprehensive strategy integrated into Saudi Arabia's overall strategic vision, rather than being limited to emergency or opportunistic responses.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is no longer constrained to binary choices of partnership; instead, it operates in a "gray zone," exploring opportunities with new partners while maintaining protection and cooperation with established allies. As Bakir and Al-Shamari (2025) observe, Saudi Arabia is institutionalizing hedging as a deliberate strategy to navigate great-power competition and shifts in the global balance of power.

Diversifying Strategic Partnerships: Engagement with China, Russia, and India

Having adjusted its partnership with the United States, Saudi Arabia is now actively diversifying its strategic alliances, moving beyond traditional Western partnerships. In recent years, the transformation of Saudi Arabia's diplomatic strategy under MBS has revealed its more profound strategic significance. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and China provides a prominent example. Following Xi Jinping's visit to Riyadh, the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement on the digital economy and accelerated cooperation in areas such as 5G, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and smart cities (Chen and Han 2019). Scholars note that this collaboration has moved beyond simple oil-and-gas transactions, evolving into a "1 + 2 + 3" structural model in which energy, infrastructure, and new technology jointly drive the development of bilateral relations (Fulton 2020).

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has maintained its defense alliance with the United States, continuing to purchase significant quantities of American air defense and missile systems. Simultaneously, it is quietly expanding its defense partnerships and exploring strategic cooperation with Russia, India, and other countries (Ahmed 2018). This approach of sustaining traditional alliances while actively cultivating new partners reflects the core principles of hedging: preserving autonomy, diversifying risks, and optimizing benefits in a structurally uncertain international system (Duan and Aldamer 2022).

For instance, research shows that Saudi–China relations are evolving at a strategic crossroads: while continuing to rely on US security guarantees, Saudi Arabia is strengthening economic and technological ties with China, demonstrating a dual-track structure consistent with hedging logic (Duan and Aldamer 2022). Moreover, the alignment of China's Belt and Road Initiative with "Vision 2030" has further reinforced cooperation in investment, energy, and technological development (Chen 2021). Overall, Saudi Arabia seeks to expand its strategic

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space and autonomy while preserving traditional advantages through multifaceted diplomacy and diversified partnerships amid intensifying great-power competition.

Building Multilateral Leverage: Regional and Global Engagement

Based on these bilateral interactions, the Saudi government is seeking greater autonomy by engaging with regional and international organizations. Through the diplomatic transformation spearheaded by MBS, Saudi Arabia has primarily implemented the core principles of a hedging strategy: maintaining established security relationships while simultaneously advancing ties with new powers. Multi-directional cooperation allows the Kingdom to expand its strategic space in a multipolar world. Scholars note that Saudi Arabia's "diplomatic triangle" model, engaging with the United States, China, Russia, and even India, is a key strategy for navigating great-power competition and structural uncertainty (Rasanani 2024).

In terms of institutional participation, Saudi Arabia has increased its global presence. It served as the G20's rotating presidency in 2020, applied to join BRICS, and was approved as an observer of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These moves reflect Saudi Arabia's transition from a symbolic international member to an active participant in global rulemaking and strategic platform-building (Alsubaie et al. 2024). For example, some studies have elevated the Saudi–China partnership to a comprehensive strategic level, highlighting cooperation beyond crude oil and infrastructure to include investment, technology, and institutional alignment (Chen and Han 2019; Quamar 2025).

Regionally, Saudi Arabia has become more proactive in Middle Eastern politics rather than maintaining a passive role. With potential shifts in the global order, these efforts form a significant part of MBS's strategy to maximize regional autonomy and redefine Saudi Arabia's role in the region (Gause 2022). Riyadh has evolved from a regional supporting actor to a core mediator, as demonstrated by initiatives such as Syria's readmission to the Arab League and efforts to ease Egyptian–Turkish tensions. This positions Saudi Arabia as a middle-power intermediary in regional transitions, helping to establish new balances (Gause 2023).

Moreover, these changes extend beyond isolated events, influencing Saudi Arabia's economic and trade structures and regional security architectures, including Iran (Gause 2024; Chaziza and Lutmar 2025). By enhancing event engagement, regional influence, and alliance building, Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy demonstrates its ability to secure a more resilient and autonomous identity (Seyedi Asl and Alamdari 2025). In an era of intensifying global competition, this approach provides strategic flexibility and establishes a new standard for Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in a multipolar world.

Managing Risks and Enhancing Flexibility: A Pragmatic Hedging Posture

Beyond partnerships and institutional engagement, Saudi Arabia has enhanced its risk management and strategic flexibility by acting prudently during periods of conflict. Under MBS's leadership, the Kingdom's foreign policy has undergone a significant shift, adopting a post-Atlantic model that was evident during the 2023 conflict with Hamas. Despite criticism from the United States, a long-standing ally, Riyadh openly condemned Israeli actions (Lima 2023). Saudi

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Arabia has clearly signaled its willingness to move beyond traditional constraints and pursue a foreign policy guided by its own strategic perceptions.

The launch of "Vision 2030" further exemplifies this strategic acumen, serving as a blueprint for diversification across both economic and political domains. Through "Vision 2030," Saudi Arabia has crafted a complex governance model in which strategic partnerships, risk management, and economic innovation converge to collectively shape the distinctiveness of the Kingdom's current international strategy.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia has been pursuing a hedging strategy since emerging as a global actor. Recognizing the growing influence of China, Russia, India, Europe, and other global powers, the Kingdom has strengthened its economic, political, and military ties with these actors while continuing to rely on American security. By employing this hedging strategy, Saudi Arabia has maintained positive relations with multiple major powers simultaneously. Consequently, hedging has evolved from a short-term tactical approach into a long-term feature of Saudi foreign policy.

These case studies align with the theoretical foundations of hedging. The literature indicates that hedging involves cultivating relationships with competing great powers to diversify interests and manage uncertainty (Marston 2024; Kuik 2021). This approach typically emerges in contexts of systemic uncertainty, especially when regional instability and great-power competition are high (Medeiros 2005; Gause 2024). Saudi Arabia's recent foreign policy exemplifies this pattern, as it strengthens ties with China, Russia, and India while retaining security arrangements with the United States. Observers note that the Kingdom's hedging strategy aims to safeguard its independence and maximize strategic flexibility (Fulton 2018; Ulrichsen 2017).

Firstly, Saudi Arabia has adopted a prudent and diversified foreign policy by maintaining strong ties with both traditional allies, such as the United States and Western European nations, and rising global powers, including China, Russia, and India, in response to intensifying global pressures. This approach, widely recognized in international relations as hedging (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019; Kuik 2008), provides Saudi Arabia with maximum strategic flexibility without committing to a single global bloc.

For example, Saudi Arabia has strengthened economic and technological links with China through collaborations such as Huawei's involvement in NEOM, the planned smart city in Tabuk Province, and Saudi Aramco's ambitious petrochemical investments in China. Simultaneously, the Kingdom continues extensive military cooperation with the United States, including large-scale weapons agreements. Notably, Saudi Arabia and the US agreed to a $110 billion arms deal in 2017 (Fulton 2019).

These dual-track policies support Saudi Arabia's position in Middle Eastern politics while securing the external environment necessary to achieve "Vision 2030," particularly in infrastructure development and economic advancement (Ulrichsen 2017). Reports about additional joint US–Saudi defense deals circulating in 2025 cannot be treated as verified information, as this study relies solely on government documents, academic publications, and reputable think tank sources through December 2024. Any such deal would require official US

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verification due to its potential impact on Saudi Arabia's strategic flexibility and defense diversification strategies.

Saudi Arabia has also expressed interest in acquiring advanced US defense hardware, such as the F-35 fighter jet. However, US policy considerations, including long-standing security concerns related to Israel's security infrastructure and export regulations, have historically prevented such acquisitions without explicit US authorization.

Secondly, in terms of risk management and preparedness, hedging enables Saudi Arabia to respond effectively and flexibly to fluctuations in the international system. By maintaining multiple diplomatic channels, the Kingdom is better prepared to handle shocks, including changes in global oil demand, regional conflicts in the Middle East, and policy shifts by major powers. For example, the 2019 Abqaiq-Khurais missile attack, claimed by Iran-backed proxies, exposed Saudi Arabia's vulnerability when relying on a single security guarantor. Following this event, the Kingdom increased security integration and technological cooperation with China and Russia (Blanchard 2023).

Domestically, Saudi Arabia has also institutionalized hedging by creating interagency security coordination platforms through initiatives such as the Delivery Program for "Vision 2030" and by leveraging the Public Investment Fund (PIF) to support its foreign policy objectives (Gause 2024; Hertog 2024).

This strategic transformation has implications not only for Saudi Arabia but also for the broader Middle East and global diplomacy. Countries such as the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt may adopt similar hedging strategies without immediately choosing sides in US–China or US–Iran rivalries (Barzegar 2023). Hedging encourages engagement and fosters shifts toward non-traditional power balances, as illustrated by Saudi Arabia's 2023 normalization with Iran, facilitated by China following proxy conflicts (Figueroa 2023). By securing membership or observer status in BRICS+, the G20, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Saudi Arabia has helped create a multipolar diplomatic space where medium powers can collectively influence international rules. This approach contrasts with traditional models dominated by a single superpower and enables the emergence of new frameworks for regional security and collective decision-making in the Middle East.

From a global perspective, Saudi Arabia's hedging strategy reflects the growing unpredictability and deepening multipolarity of the emerging international landscape. Nations in this environment, especially those that are not great powers, face pressures arising from simultaneous strategic competition and conflicting interests (Csenger 2021). Saudi Arabia under MBS exemplifies how a second-tier nation can assert strategic independence through multi-track diplomacy, avoiding fixed alignments. For instance, the Kingdom has pursued deeper Saudi–China collaborations in energy, technology, and finance while maintaining its security partnership with the United States (Fulton 2019). Notable examples include Aramco's joint refinery projects in Liaoning and Huawei's involvement in NEOM, a planned smart city in northwest Saudi Arabia (Truby 2025).

Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia has strengthened its institutional engagement with both Western-led and non-Western multilateral platforms by joining BRICS in 2024, actively participating in the G20 and OPEC+, and serving as an observer in the SCO (Chen 2021). This balanced approach enhances its negotiating power in global governance debates on digital infrastructure, international trade, and energy transition (Rasanani 2024).

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The strategic application of hedging has elevated Saudi Arabia's international standing and influence. Other nations, from Indonesia in Southeast Asia to the UAE in the Middle East, are adopting similar strategies in response to a fragmented international system (Rahmanillah, Bastian and Ihsan 2023). Once considered a tactical tool, hedging has become essential for maintaining national autonomy (Korolev 2024; Ciorciari and Haacke 2019). In pursuit of domestic economic, political, and technological development, MBS has leveraged hedging to navigate potential institutional fragmentation and uncertain alliance formations (Kuik 2020). The overarching aim is to enhance Saudi Arabia's independence and global strength, safeguard the interests of non-Western international actors, maintain strong relations with major powers, and reduce geopolitical risks. By doing so, Saudi Arabia has reshaped the strategic landscape of the Middle East and offered a diplomatic model for other nations to emulate (Al-Saud and Kéchichian 2020).

Policy Implications

This research provides practical guidance for major international actors engaging with Riyadh's evolving foreign policy, particularly through the lens of Saudi Arabia's strategic hedging.

Firstly, the United States must recognize and accommodate Saudi Arabia's multi-alignment strategy. American policy should move beyond positioning itself as the Kingdom's sole security guarantor and instead focus on areas such as alternative energy, technological collaboration, and investment. Strengthening the economic and non-security aspects of the US–Saudi partnership is essential to ensure that Riyadh's hedging does not fully pivot toward Eastern powers.

For China, long-term engagement with Saudi Arabia requires institutionalized partnerships and sustainable economic and strategic cooperation. This includes fostering deeper collaboration between China and Saudi Arabia, and between China and Saudi allies, and integrating Saudi Arabia into initiatives such as the Belt and Road Economic Strategy (Silk Road Economic Belt). Anchoring Saudi Arabia's political and economic alignment with China through multilateral frameworks such as SCO and BRICS+ membership can strengthen Saudi Arabia's hedging position while positioning it centrally within China's long-term economic vision.

Finally, risk management is critical for Saudi Arabia's sustained success. MBS must actively engage with both traditional and emerging partners to reduce the trust deficits that hedging inevitably creates. This requires clear messaging about Saudi Arabia's non-exclusive engagement across multiple domains, including economic development, technological innovation, non-traditional security challenges, soft security initiatives, and societal cooperation. Such an approach reinforces the Kingdom's sovereign right to balance relationships with all global actors while maintaining strategic autonomy.

CONCLUSION

The significance of this research lies in demonstrating that Saudi Arabia adopts a hedging policy to navigate a multipolar world, as outlined in MBS's strategy. The Kingdom balances its traditional ties with the United States while simultaneously engaging China, Russia,

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and India through "Vision 2030's" economic, technological, and political initiatives, underscoring Saudi Arabia's strategic autonomy.

From a hedging theory perspective, this paper argues that the strategic cultivation of independence in a multipolar global environment is the primary driver behind this shift in Saudi foreign policy. Notably, this study fills a substantial gap in the literature on Middle Eastern middle-power assertive statecraft by establishing that hedging is applicable beyond the Asia-Pacific region. It demonstrates that hedging is not limited to a specific regional context but represents a comprehensive strategy that integrates domestic transformation with global engagement.

From a policy standpoint, the Saudi case offers lessons at both global and regional levels. The United States must adapt to Saudi Arabia's multi-alignment strategy to remain a respected partner. China should continue developing robust economic and technological partnerships while respecting Saudi sovereignty and freedom of action. In conclusion, this case illustrates how a middle-power nation like Saudi Arabia can assert significant independence through a carefully applied hedging strategy. The key takeaway for policymakers is that Riyadh is not a passive actor but an assertive and autonomous ally, moving beyond merely reacting to great-power politics to actively pursuing its own agenda.

Future research could explore this strategy's responsiveness to emerging challenges, such as competition in AI and 5G, as well as the reactions of other Gulf nations to Saudi Arabia's evolving role. While this study relies on interviews and policy documents, it makes an important contribution to understanding how middle-power nations respond to competition in a rapidly changing world, even if it cannot capture every aspect of the process.

CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Qin Qining: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft. **Siti Zuliha Binti Razali:** project administration, methodology, data curation, writing – review and editing.

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Geopolitical Determinants of the European Union's Migration Policy Shift: From Open-Door to Closed-Border Approaches

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Abstract
Europe is facing an intensifying migration crisis along the Balkan and Central Mediterranean routes, prompting a shift from earlier open-door policies toward more restrictive approaches. This paper analyzes the geopolitical forces driving the EU's evolving migration strategy, focusing on border security, demographic pressures, and political tensions within and between EU Member States. Using a multidisciplinary framework and a critical case study design, it examines governmental speeches, media narratives, scholarly research, comparative national policies, and official data. Germany, Hungary, and Sweden are assessed to illustrate contrasting open- and closed-door models and their implications for security, regional stability, and collective EU governance. The study argues that sustainable migration management requires a more balanced, geopolitically informed framework that reconciles security imperatives with the EU's normative and humanitarian commitments, thereby ensuring long-term stability and coherent policy outcomes across the EU.

Keywords
Geopolitics; Migration Policy; European Union; Border Security; Balkan Route; Regional Stability; International Affairs

INTRODUCTION

"Peoples and nations are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: Who are we? And they are answering that question in the traditional way human beings have answered it, by reference to the things that mean most to them. People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions."

- Samuel P. Huntington

Migration is a deeply divisive issue in Europe and other parts of the Western world, and it is arguably one of the most contentious challenges in contemporary politics. Major conflicts in the EU's immediate neighborhood and beyond, such as those in Syria, Libya, and the Sahel, have profoundly affected the EU through migration crises, security threats, and regional instability. The civil war in Syria was a key driver of the large-scale migrant and refugee influx that peaked in Europe in 2015, triggering significant political and social tensions as well as debates over border control.

This paper argues that the divergent domestic policies adopted by Germany, Sweden, and Hungary after the 2015 crisis not only shaped but fundamentally fractured the EU's migration policy. Their differing approaches contributed to a reactive, increasingly restrictive "Fortress Europe" model that prioritized border security over a cohesive, humanitarian strategy.

Despite the complex and multilayered nature of migration, the influence of state fragility and violent conflict remains central to understanding long-term migration patterns, particularly within the European context. As a result of the substantial increase in migration flows, Europe is now facing an unprecedented crisis. The challenge of managing the continuous arrival of refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants, many of whom view the European Union as a promised land for themselves and their children, is generating significant tensions within and among EU Member States and all countries along the migration route.

Migration has played a significant role in shaping contemporary Europe, influencing demographic trends, economic development, and cultural landscapes. In recent years, the concept of an "open-door policy" has gained prominence, especially during humanitarian emergencies. Broadly defined, an open-door policy is a framework that supports the acceptance of migrants and refugees with minimal restrictions, often motivated by commitments to human rights, labor needs, and international solidarity. While some European countries have embraced this approach, others have pursued more cautious strategies, resulting in a fragmented and politically sensitive migration landscape.

Germany's open-door policy became a defining symbol during the 2015 refugee crisis, as people fled conflict and instability, particularly the Syrian civil war, the rise of ISIS, and ongoing violence in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. At the peak of the European migrant crisis, then-Chancellor Angela Merkel adopted a welcoming stance, famously declaring "*Wir schaffen das*" ("We can do it"). Germany opened its borders to hundreds of thousands of refugees, primarily from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. More than one million asylum applicants were permitted to enter the country. A central concern was that Merkel's decision would signal an open-door policy to aspiring migrants worldwide, potentially increasing future migration to Germany and making the country more attractive to both irregular and humanitarian migrants. The idea of a "pull effect" has remained a cornerstone of policy debates ever since.

Sweden likewise adopted a highly open approach, accepting more refugees per capita than any other EU nation in 2015. Swedish policies provided extensive support for integration, including housing, education, and healthcare. Historically, Sweden has championed liberal and humanitarian principles, emphasizing collective responsibility and human rights. Rooted in its national identity as an empathetic and socially just society, Sweden is recognized for its transparency, solidarity, and commitment to humanitarian values (UNHCR 2018).

In contrast, Hungary and Poland pursued highly restrictive policies, constructing physical barriers and rejecting EU-mandated relocation quotas. These governments justified their positions by invoking security concerns, cultural integrity, and national sovereignty, thereby intensifying broader EU debates over burden-sharing for migration.

Based on the above discussion, the research question guiding this paper is as follows:

RQ: Did the domestic policies adopted by Germany, Hungary, and Sweden after 2015, specifically the open-door and closed-door approaches, influence the development of the EU's current migration policies?

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Drawing on previous research by other scholars, this paper examines different normative migration claims, as outlined by Prof. Bauböck (2019), who introduces a political theory framework that addresses the tension between freedom of movement, global justice, and democratic autonomy. He argues that refugees and economic migrants each invoke distinct normative claims, complicating the implementation of a one-size-fits-all migration policy. Policies favoring either open borders or strict closures tend to blur these distinctions, undermining ethical governance.

According to Karolewski and Benedikter (2018) in their paper "Europe's Refugee and Migrant Crisis: Political Responses to Asymmetrical Pressures," the refugee and migrant crisis has emerged as a significant and contentious issue in contemporary European politics. Although it was sometimes mischaracterized as a "pure" refugee crisis, it was in fact a complex, asymmetrical "mixed" refugee-migrant crisis that generated substantial political and economic inconsistencies and further weakened the already fragile European Union. The article argues that the crisis's asymmetrical nature, combined with the EU's uneven structure, largely explains the EU's response.

Three primary aspects of asymmetry are recognized in the refugee issue. First, the crisis affects certain EU Member States far more than others. Second, the EU's unequal structure, characterized by horizontal divergence, opt-out clauses, and uneven burden sharing, tends to provoke asymmetrical responses. Third, Germany's role as a pivotal actor in the bloc has contributed to inherent disparities and significantly influenced the management of the crisis during 2015–2016. These three asymmetrical qualities have strongly shaped the challenges of achieving a unified EU response to the refugee issue.

This study will also explore how these dynamics have shaped the political landscape within the European Union, potentially influencing future immigration strategies. To trace the transition from emergency response to a lasting state ideology, this argument draws upon securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998) and the concept of differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig 2018).

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, official policy documents, speeches, and Eurostat data from 2015 to 2025 for Germany, Sweden, and Hungary are analyzed. These countries demonstrate a striking dualism: a temporary "open-door" policy is motivated by humanitarian imperatives and normative values, while a more persistent, institutionalized "closed-door" strategy is emphasized, focusing on border security, deterrence, and externalization. These approaches are examined through descriptive data analysis, and the underlying tensions between ethical obligations, public opinion, geopolitical interests, and institutional cohesion within the EU are highlighted. Furthermore, the broader European divide concerning migration, national identity, and geopolitical considerations is addressed.

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MERKEL VS. ORBÁN: TWO VISIONS OF MIGRATION IN EUROPE

The significant influx of refugees and other migrants, primarily associated with the year 2015 and the "long summer of migration," marked a pivotal turning point in multiple ways. Although the label "migration or refugee crisis" is debatable, the notion of a crisis as a decisive moment and critical threshold is highly appropriate. Despite the rise in migrant numbers during this period (IOM 2015; Eurostat 2015), scholars argue that the crisis was triggered by the inadequacy of EU policies to support humanitarian intervention, stemming from a deficient migration framework (Castelli Gattinara and Zamponi 2020, 626).

The migration corridor established in spring 2015 enabled third-country nationals to travel across the Western Balkans on their way from Greece to Western Europe. Since 2009, approximately 3.4 million people have entered the EU irregularly, representing the largest movement of people across Europe since the end of World War II.

More than one million refugees used the Balkan route to reach Austria, Germany, and Sweden, with approximately 578,000 registering in Serbia along the way (Oruc et al. 2020). These figures are only estimates. It is believed that around two-thirds of migrants are registered in transit countries; therefore, the actual numbers are likely much higher (Šabić and Borić 2016). The Balkan and Mediterranean corridors continue to serve as major migration routes today.

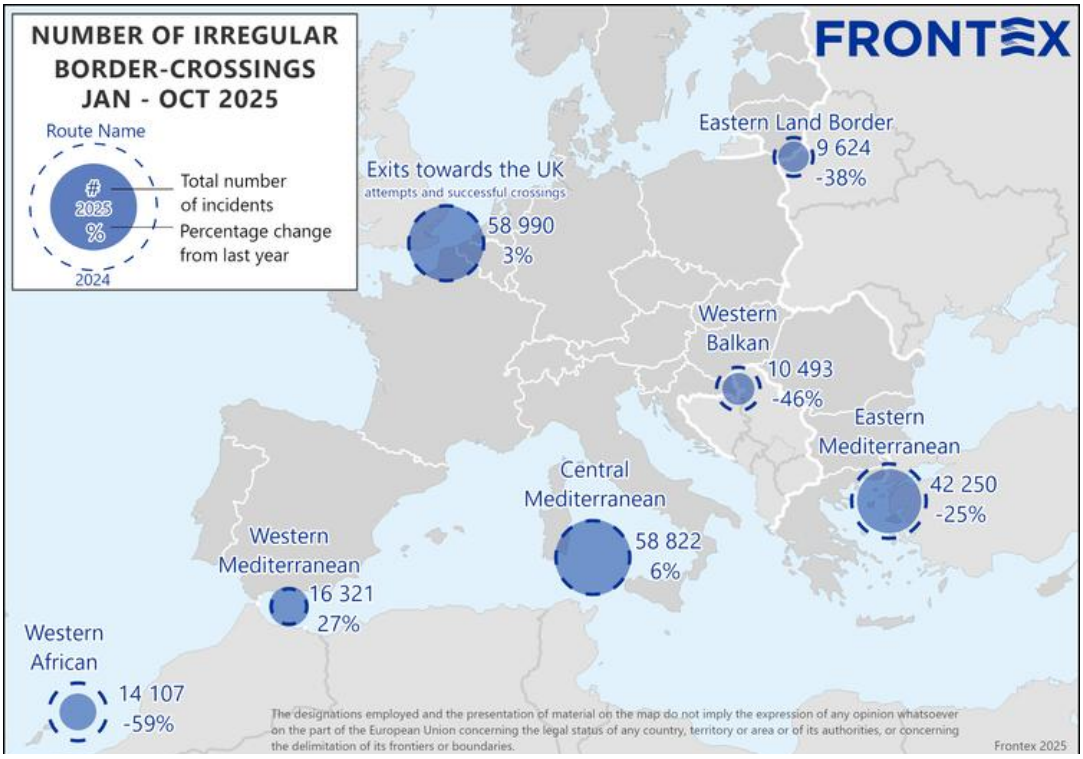

Image 1: Number of Irregular Border-Crossings, Jan–Oct 2025 (Source: Frontex 2025)

Image 1 illustrates irregular border crossings into the EU during the first ten months of 2025. The Central Mediterranean route remained the busiest, accounting for two out of every five irregular entries into the EU. According to Frontex data, irregular crossings on the Western

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Mediterranean route increased by 27 percent, with Bangladeshi, Egyptian, and Afghan nationals most frequently reported (Frontex 2025).

The Balkan Route serves as an illustrative example of how externalized border "management" in the EU's neighboring regions is closely intertwined with the control of migration both within and beyond the Union, whether through pushbacks, chain deportations, or non-admission policies. The specific geographical imaginaries associated with the Balkan Route play a crucial role in the complex landscape of migration governance.

The significance of the Balkan Route and Macedonia's role in securing Europe was highlighted during the opening of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán praised Macedonia's Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski for his leadership in protecting Europe's borders against irregular migration, stating, "Our Macedonian hero Hristijan Mickoski won the election despite full support from Brussels for his opponent. He is the defender of the stronghold that protects Europe's southern border from migration. Long live Macedonia!" (Kocovska 2025).

Minca and Collins (2021) analyze migratory biopolitics within the Balkan Route, referring to it as "The Game." This term, used by migrants, captures their repeated attempts to reach the EU through the Balkan corridor and represents "a spatial tactic implemented by the refugees as a way of engaging with the impossibility of legally traveling to their desired destinations."

Over the past decade, twenty-nine million migrants, both regular and irregular, have entered Europe, placing substantial pressure on the continent's already strained and largely ineffective immigration system (Robinson and Roy 2024). In 2023 alone, approximately four and a half million immigrants arrived in Europe: three and a half million legally and one million irregularly. That same year, irregular migrants entering Europe primarily originated from Africa and the Middle East, with Syria as the leading country of origin, followed by states in West Africa and Afghanistan (Cook 2024).

Due to the large influx of people entering Europe, migration has become perhaps the most influential factor shaping European politics in the modern era. Concerns about crime rates and public safety, along with inadequate policies to support acculturation and integration, have contributed to growing public discontent throughout Western Europe and Scandinavia. The recent riots in the United Kingdom represent the latest manifestation of the political pressures building across the continent. Further complicating matters, Europe's asylum regulations have remained essentially unchanged for nearly two decades, leading to their effective collapse during the 2015 migrant influx. The expansion of the Schengen Area has also meant that entry into any one participating state is effectively equivalent to entry into Europe as a whole (Michta 2024).

The 2015 refugee crisis exposed deep divisions within the European Union, none more striking than the contrast between Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Their respective migration policies have come to symbolize two competing visions for Europe's future: one rooted in national sovereignty and cultural preservation, and the other grounded in moral responsibility, humanitarian principles, and multilateral cooperation. Merkel emphasized long-term integration, prioritizing investment in language instruction, housing, education, and job training. Viktor Orbán, stating "We will not allow it," took the opposite approach, rapidly fortifying Hungary's southern borders and enacting strict anti-immigration laws. He rejected EU relocation quotas and framed migration as

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a threat to Hungary's Christian identity and European values. Orbán portrayed Merkel's policy as naive and dangerous, arguing that it encouraged irregular migration and undermined national security (Reuters Staff 2015).

The clash reflects more profound ideological differences: Merkel advocated shared responsibility, human rights, and EU solidarity, while Orbán emphasized national sovereignty, border controls, and cultural homogeneity. Where Merkel viewed migration as a manageable challenge requiring compassion and coordination, Orbán saw it as an existential threat that demanded a hardline response. Merkel's approach initially received international praise but also sparked political backlash, contributing to the rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Orbán, by contrast, consolidated his domestic power by rallying nationalist support and portraying himself as a defender of "real Europe."

Classical realist theorists, including Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, examined the dynamics of state competition, focusing on the pursuit of power and the expansion of military strength. Realism maintains that national security outweighs moral considerations, as demonstrated by Hungary's border closures, pushback legislation, and the securitization of refugee flows. As one of the most influential theories in international relations, realism asserts that states are inherently insecure due to human nature and therefore continually strive to enhance their capabilities. Wróbel (2018) noted that Orbán's statements reflected concerns that the presence of refugees would undermine the value of Hungary's "Christian state."

Their opposing positions contributed to policy gridlock within the EU and exposed the limitations of a unified European migration policy. Efforts to reform the asylum system have repeatedly stalled amid such deep ideological divisions (Schlee 2018).

The 2015 crisis concerning the reception conditions for asylum seekers highlighted a significant lack of solidarity among EU Member States. Eastern European countries refused to accept the refugee quotas set by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, which totaled 160,000 individuals, in stark contrast to the one million accepted by Germany and 1.2 million across the EU as a whole (Wihtol de Wenden 2019). This situation significantly disrupted European immigration and asylum policy, challenging the EU's core values of human rights and burden-sharing.

The Syrian crisis resulted in seven million internally displaced persons and generated five million international refugees. In the summer of 2015, widely broadcast images capturing the arrival of refugees drew public attention, as numerous European border posts along the Balkan route were closed following the landing of Syrians on Greek islands near Turkey, including Lesbos, Kos, and Samos. The EU Member States progressively established border controls, including those between Greece and Turkey, Greece and North Macedonia, and Hungary and Serbia, as well as within the EU, such as between Hungary and Austria, France and Italy, and Greece and Bulgaria (Wihtol de Wenden 2019).

"WIR SCHAFFEN DAS" A DECADE LATER

In 2015, Merkel's "Wir schaffen das" became the German equivalent of Obama's "Yes we can": a seemingly casual remark that nonetheless conveyed her determination to confront the logistical and political challenges she faced at the time. She also adopted Margaret Thatcher's famous line, "There is no alternative," which she literally translated into German as

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"alternativlos," meaning "alternative-less." Her use of the phrase inadvertently catalyzed the creation of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the first right-wing party to enter the Bundestag since her CDU. Echoing Merkel's rhetoric against her, AfD politician Alexander Gauland declared at a party gathering in October 2015: "Wir wollen das gar nicht schaffen" — "we really don't want to manage this" (Oltermann and Connolly 2021).

A decade later, confronted with another surge in irregular migration, EU capitals are increasingly saying, "No, we cannot." More precisely, one might say, "We shall not." This shift is evident in Germany's changing migration policies: in September 2024, Germany reinstated border checks at all land frontiers; France pledged to restore "order at our borders"; the Netherlands announced its "most stringent" regulations to date; and Sweden and Finland proposed severe anti-migrant measures. Following Germany's border clampdown, Chancellor Olaf Scholz claimed that the government had already achieved an important turnaround in reducing irregular migration.

However, Scholz's approach risks triggering a chain reaction across Europe that could ultimately undermine the idea of "post-nationalism." In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, leader of the far-right Freedom Party, asked, "If Germany can do it, why can't we?" adding, "The sooner, the better." Other far-right parties celebrated these developments. By succumbing to anti-migration sentiment, supposedly "centrist" parties are advancing the far right's agenda and legitimizing its vision of a Europe with reinforced borders. It was therefore no surprise that Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán congratulated Scholz on Twitter, stating: "@Bundeskanzler, welcome to the club!" #StopMigration (Stierl 2024).

We are also witnessing a shift away from the previous open-door policies in other European countries, including the Netherlands, Finland, and Poland. The newly elected Dutch government in 2023, led by the far-right, anti-immigration Freedom Party (PVV), took decisive measures. The PVV secured an election victory by pledging to implement "the strictest admission rules in the EU," arguing that the country "can no longer bear the influx of immigrants." However, after a year and a half, on June 3, 2025, it was announced that the PVV would leave the governing coalition due to insufficient support for its asylum proposal. "We had no choice. I promised the voters the strictest asylum policy ever, but that was not granted to us," a party representative said. The PVV had presented a 10-point plan to reduce immigration, including halting asylum applications and temporarily suspending family reunification for all recognized refugees. After resigning, the representative noted, "We wanted a stricter asylum policy… You see that many countries in the European Union – Austria, Poland, Germany, and Belgium – are taking more stringent measures" (Roach 2025).

In Finland, the government is proposing changes to the healthcare rights of migrants residing illegally in the country. These amendments align with the Government Programme's objectives of facilitating the departure or removal of individuals with illegal status and enhancing public order and security. One proposed measure would revoke the rights of individuals residing illegally to access health and social services, except for urgent care, and to social security benefits. The goal of these changes is to eliminate incentives for illegal residence and encourage the return of individuals with such status (Finnish Government 2025).

In his first television interview after being elected, French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau stated: "The French people want more order: order in the streets, order at the

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borders." He added that by cracking down on crime and immigration, Paris aimed to "review EU legislation that is no longer suitable" (Chrisafis 2024).

On March 27, 2025, Poland temporarily suspended the right of migrants arriving via its border with Belarus to apply for asylum. Prime Minister Donald Tusk emphasized that the controversial bill would be enacted "without a moment's delay" following its signing into law by President Andrzej Duda, stating: "I believe it is essential to enhance the security of our borders and the safety of Poles" (Paternoster 2025).

This new wave of restrictive sentiment across the EU raises questions about the future of the Schengen Zone. It may also jeopardize the EU's new asylum and migration pact, finalized in 2024 after nearly a decade of negotiations. Moreover, the European Commission's latest migration proposal is not entirely new. The plan introduces so-called "return hubs" in countries outside the EU, particularly in the Balkans, including North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo, to host migrants whose asylum requests have been denied. These hubs are intended to process migrants and either return them to their home countries or relocate them to other states willing to accept them. Critics argue that this approach merely shifts the burden to the "host-hub" countries without addressing the underlying migration challenges.

MIGRATION IS RESHAPING EUROPE: IS THERE ANY HOPE FOR THE CONTINENT?

In recent years, Europe has become a destination for large numbers of people fleeing war, political turmoil, and poverty in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Germany, France, Italy, and Spain all experienced consistent increases in their immigrant populations between 2010 and 2024, with Germany's growth beginning in 2016 and becoming particularly pronounced. Figure 1 reports the number of immigrants residing in the specified country for each year. Immigrants are defined as individuals born in a country other than the one in which they reside.

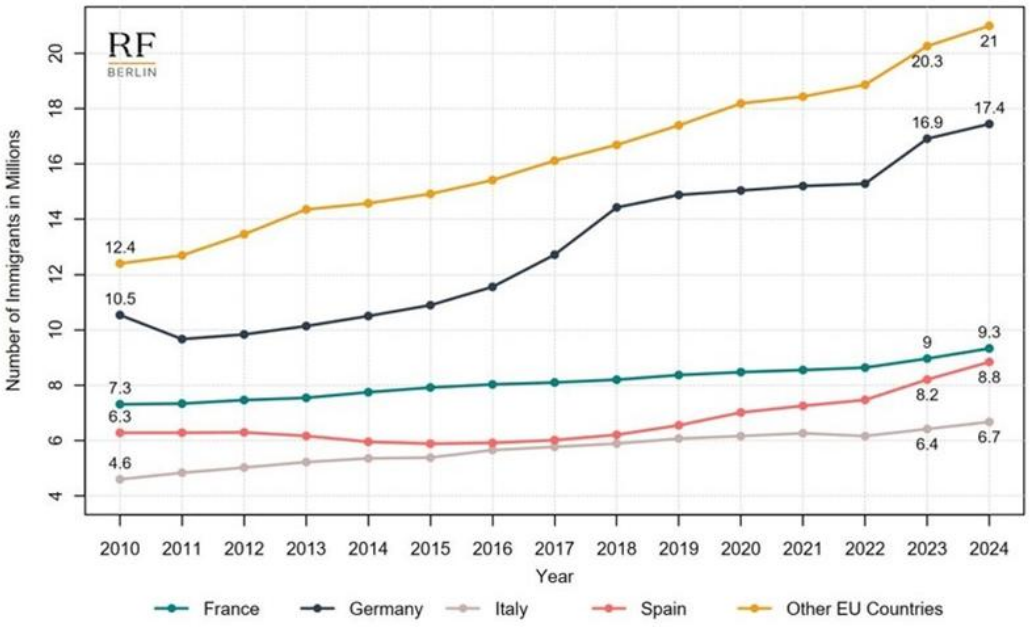

Figure 1: Number of Immigrants in EU Countries (Source: Frattini and Pulito 2025)

Germany's immigrant population rose from approximately 11 million in 2015 to 17.4 million in 2024, increasing from 13.4% to 20.9% of the total population. Spain received about 3 million immigrants during the same period, with its immigrant population rising from 5.9 million to 8.8 million (from 12.7% to 18.2% of the resident population), while France and Italy saw relatively modest increases. Collectively, all other EU countries experienced an influx of roughly 6 million immigrants from 2015 to 2024, a figure comparable to Germany's increase alone (Frattini and Pulito 2025).

These figures seem feasible for a continent with a population of around 500 million. However, the arrival of migrants, mostly entering EU countries illegally and from distant regions and foreign cultures, has created new social, political, and economic challenges in a continent still recovering from the financial impacts of the Great Recession. The migration crisis has disrupted the political economy of EU countries, particularly those near or at its external borders. Regions and communities in frontline states, such as Greece and Italy, have borne a disproportionate share of these challenges; in these areas, it often appears as though Europe is under siege (Kyriakopoulos 2019).

Politics, policies, and geography have played a significant role in these developments. EU decision-makers were caught unprepared to manage chaotic migration in a coordinated manner. Europe's ethnic map is changing. Although estimates vary, it is generally accepted that there are currently around 25 million Muslims in the 28 EU Member States. The issue of migration intersects with declining fertility rates across Europe. For instance, Europe's overall fertility rate has been below replacement level since 2008, when 4.68 million children were born. By 2022, the EU registered only 1.46 live births per woman, approximately one million fewer births than in 2008 (Eurostat 2024). In contrast, Europe's annual birthrate was around seven million in 1960 (Yanatma 2024).

By comparison, a 2017 analysis by the Pew Research Center found that the average Muslim woman in Europe had 2.6 children, one full child more than the average non-Muslim woman that year. Today, the largest Muslim populations in Europe are concentrated in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, and Sweden. Integrating these communities remains a prominent topic in the political landscape of these nations (Hackett 2017).

Cultural tensions are already palpable. Politicians opposing continued mass immigration argue that migration, particularly from Africa and the Middle East, is reshaping Europe's ethnic and cultural landscape, transforming a continent steeped in Judeo-Christian traditions for over two millennia into a multicultural and multi-confessional space. While this issue is expected to remain a central concern, it is often avoided, as European elites appear increasingly reluctant to engage in discussions about national identity and culture, discussions vital for societal cohesion and resilience. Consequently, Europe is likely to continue grappling with the dual challenge of, on one hand, formulating administrative measures to curb or manage migrant inflows, and on the other, addressing the more profound cultural implications of immigration, particularly from the Middle East and Africa, which remain at the forefront of European political discourse (Michta 2024).

A majority of Europeans believe that the migration crisis has been mismanaged. This perception has become even more pronounced in light of EU Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos' 2018 remarks on Europe's migration management (2025), where he stated:

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> We all know the current system is broken. If asylum systems were properly aligned, there would be no incentive for secondary movements. We must intensify returns and ensure the strict enforcement of return decisions. If Member States don't use these arrangements proactively and effectively, they lose their value. We also need to do more to address the root causes of migration. We need to do more with certain North African countries to help them stem irregular migration at the source.

The "securitization of migration" and other migration-related policies framed as security issues have gained increasing attention since the large refugee inflow into Europe in 2015. Public discourse and political debates often emphasize the stereotype of criminal migrants as "male, young, and delinquent," focusing on the perceived correlation between illegal immigration and crime rates, with integration considered an intermediary factor (Kraler et al. 2022).

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between crime rates and immigration, using a variety of research designs and parameters. Many rely on national crime statistics to assess the prevalence of crime among non-natives. In contrast, significant research on crime, integration, and related issues has been conducted at both national and local levels. The migration crisis is expected to continue widening the gap between Europe's policy elites and an increasingly dissatisfied public, particularly in the most affected countries of southern and western Europe.

Concerns about the involvement of immigrants in terrorist attacks since 2015 have further heightened worries about the potential radicalization of refugees and asylum seekers. In several instances, violent extremists have exploited migration flows to gain entry into Europe. Research has shown that refugees have, in some cases, participated in extremist attacks (Abushi and Nordbruch 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the majority of terrorist attacks in Europe since 2015 have been carried out by domestic actors rather than by migrants.

Schmid (2016) noted that it is not the recently arrived migrants but rather subsequent generations who are more susceptible to radicalization. He stated, "If they are not fully integrated in host societies, they might develop resentment, and with some, that anger might become so strong that they, or more likely, their children, turn against the host society. That has been one of the reasons why so many of the foreign fighters from Europe were the sons of immigrants" (Schmid 2016, 45).

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) conducted three studies on the distribution of individuals registered as suspected offenders by native and non-native background for the period 2007–2018, with the latest study published in 2021. All three studies show that the overwhelming majority of people, regardless of origin, are not suspected of criminal activity. However, individuals with non-native backgrounds are more frequently registered as suspects than those with native backgrounds. According to the latest research, individuals born abroad are 2.5 times more likely to be registered as suspects in criminal investigations than those born in Sweden to two native-born parents. For individuals born in Sweden to two non-native parents, the relative risk rises to 3.2, indicating they are slightly more than three times as likely to be registered as suspected offenders compared to those with two native-born parents.

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Significantly, the magnitude of this excess risk diminishes when adjusting for differences in age, gender, and living conditions, decreasing from 2.5 to 1.8 for foreign-born individuals and from 3.2 to 1.7 for those born in Sweden to two non-native parents (Brå 2021).

Among persons born abroad, the lowest proportions of suspected offenders are found among those from East Asia, Scandinavia outside Sweden, EU15 countries, Western Europe outside Scandinavia, and the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Conversely, the highest proportions of suspected offenders are observed among those born in West Asia, Central Asia, and various regions of Africa, including North Africa, East Africa, and other African countries (excluding those in North and East Africa) (Brå 2021).

The 2019 literature analysis by Brå presents findings consistent with Nordic studies on crime and individuals with foreign backgrounds conducted from 2005 to 2019. It indicates that individuals with foreign backgrounds are overrepresented in crime statistics, although this overrepresentation varies depending on the type of crime and the country of origin. Brå notes that factors contributing to segregation, such as limited education and employment opportunities, are associated with higher rates of criminality among those with foreign ancestry. Other contributing factors include experiences of war trauma, mental health issues, and the levels of crime, violence, and economic development in the countries of origin (Brå 2025).

Public anger and mistrust have escalated, particularly in response to the radicalization of native Muslim Europeans and extremist Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe. These incidents include a stabbing in Mulhouse, France, by an Algerian illegal immigrant under an expulsion order; a car-ramming attack in Munich by a 24-year-old Afghan resident; and a knife attack in Villach, Austria, by a 23-year-old Syrian refugee. These events have raised legitimate concerns about the security risks associated with immigration, especially given their rapid occurrence. In response, politicians quickly called for stricter immigration laws and drew clear links between immigration and terrorism. For instance, the leader of Germany's far-right party AfD, Alice Weidel, wrote on X (formerly Twitter) following the Munich attack: "Is this intended to carry on forever? Turn around migration now!" (Renard and Demuynck 2025).

Reports and data from European counter-terrorism agencies indicate a measurable security threat associated with migration. In France, data from the Ministry of the Interior in 2023 show that out of 20,120 individuals recorded in the National Database for the Prevention of Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism (FSPRT), 4,263 (21%) are foreign nationals. In Germany, 138 of the 480 individuals (29%) evaluated by security authorities as dangerous Islamist extremists did not hold a German passport (Renard and Demuynck 2025).

For context, France has 5.6 million foreign nationals within a total population of 68.6 million, representing 8.2% of the overall population. Germany has approximately 14 million foreign nationals within a total population of 84.4 million, representing 16.6% of the population (Balogog 2023).

Although much research on migrants focuses on their role as perpetrators, and a significant portion of the literature addresses right-wing radicalism, extremism, and xenophobic violence, there is a relative shortage of empirical studies on migrants as victims. Generally, studies give limited attention to the victim's perspective. However, examining the relationship between integration and crime provides an opportunity to view migrants not only as potential perpetrators but also as victims of criminal activity, including human trafficking (THB), hate crimes, and assaults on refugee homes and asylum seekers (Kraler et al. 2022).

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POLITICIZED AND "VULNERABLE" NEIGHBORHOODS IN EUROPE

"Banlieues," "Ghettos," "Vulnerable areas," "Molenbeek," and "No-go zones" are official labels or derogatory terms used to describe a group of politicized neighborhoods in contemporary Europe. These neighborhoods share two key characteristics. First, they face challenges related to crime rates, employment performance, reputation, and various other factors affecting well-being and prosperity. Second, a significant proportion of residents are immigrants from non-Western backgrounds (Arbaci 2007; Escafré-Dublet and Lelévrier 2019).

In light of ongoing debates about migration and its societal impacts, these neighborhoods have become essential sites for exploring complex issues, including interethnic relations, the development of parallel societies, spatial stigmatization, systemic discrimination, social inequalities, and the broader foundations of social cohesion (Esaiasson and Sohlberg 2024).

Angela Merkel may be the first European, and indeed Western, leader to publicly acknowledge the existence of "no-go areas." In a 2018 interview, she stated that "no-go areas" do exist in Germany and noted that the arrival of "so many refugees" in the country "has raised multiple questions" (The Associated Press 2018).

What exactly is a "no-go zone"? The term is not precisely defined and can vary depending on context. Broadly, it can describe areas considered unsafe for outsiders, including tourists, foreigners, and emergency personnel such as police or firefighters. In another sense, it refers to "parallel societies" within an existing society, defined as situations in which national social cohesion is lacking, and the state is either unable or unwilling to manage social diversity. These societies may emerge when immigrant groups self-segregate into cohesive communities or when non-violent alternative systems are established outside of state oversight. The term is often controversial, as it is frequently invoked in political debates to criticize perceived failures in integration initiatives.

There are two primary contexts for the term: self-segregation and unsuccessful integration. Introduced by the sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer, the term refers to immigrant communities that establish their own social networks, educational systems, and job markets, while remaining mainly segregated from the majority population. This can result in socio-economic isolation and is a contentious issue in countries with significant immigrant populations. Some nations have enacted policies to address this trend, such as Denmark's legislation to identify and mitigate "parallel societies" (Borch 2019).

Table 1 below presents the official labels used for neighborhoods in countries where debates over ethnically distinct or "vulnerable" neighborhoods are most pronounced (Esaiasson and Sohlberg 2024).

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Table 1: Country-Specific Characteristics of European Politicized and Vulnerable Neighborhoods (Source: Esaiasson and Sohlberg 2024)

Country-specific characteristics of European politicized and vulnerable neighborhoods

Country	Official labels	Type of diversity	Main location
Belgium	Quartiers en difficulté (Neighborhoods with problems)	Mixed (ethnic enclaves and super diversity)	Inner city
Denmark	Parallell samfunn* (Parallel societies)	Primarily super diversity	Periphery
France	Quartiers sensibles (At-risk neighborhoods)	Mixed (ethnic enclaves and super diversity)	Periphery
Germany	Benachteiligtes Quartier (Disadvantaged neighborhoods)	Primarily super diversity	Mixed (both inner city and periphery)
Netherlands	Krachtwijken (Opportunity zones)	Mixed (ethnic enclaves and super diversity)	Mixed (both inner city and periphery)
Norway	Utsatte områder (Vulnerable neighborhoods)	Primarily super diversity	Periphery
Sweden	Utsatta områden (Vulnerable neighborhoods)	Primarily super diversity	Periphery
UK	Areas of multiple deprivation	Mixed (ethnic enclaves and super diversity)	Inner city

Before 2021, the official label was Gettos (Ghettos).

Numerous observers have noted the existence of such parallel societies in Germany, as well as in Belgium, particularly in the Molenbeek district of Brussels (see Image 2), which is notorious for harboring terrorist jihadis. Similar phenomena have been observed in metropolitan areas of France, including certain Parisian suburbs, and in various enclaves within English cities.

It is somewhat ironic that Merkel is associated with this issue, given that in 2015 she unilaterally declared that Germany would allow an unlimited number of migrants to enter the EU via both maritime and land borders, a position she publicly reaffirmed in July 2017. While Merkel primarily emphasized Syrians fleeing their war-torn country, her statements effectively became a rallying cry for at least 1.5 million "irregular arrivals." Germany has since faced numerous challenges as a result of these policies, including widely reported sexual assaults on women by groups of migrant men congregating in public spaces during holidays, terrorist attacks on trains and Christmas markets, rising crime rates, and the tacit acceptance of polygamy among segments of its unassimilated migrant population (Cadman 2018).

Germany has not been the only country struggling with these issues. The Migration Research Institute in Budapest, affiliated with the Matthias Corvinus College, estimates that there are approximately 900 uncontrolled areas across Europe. The vision of a Europe with open borders has thus contributed to the emergence of numerous no-go zones (Meotti and Sheva 2024).

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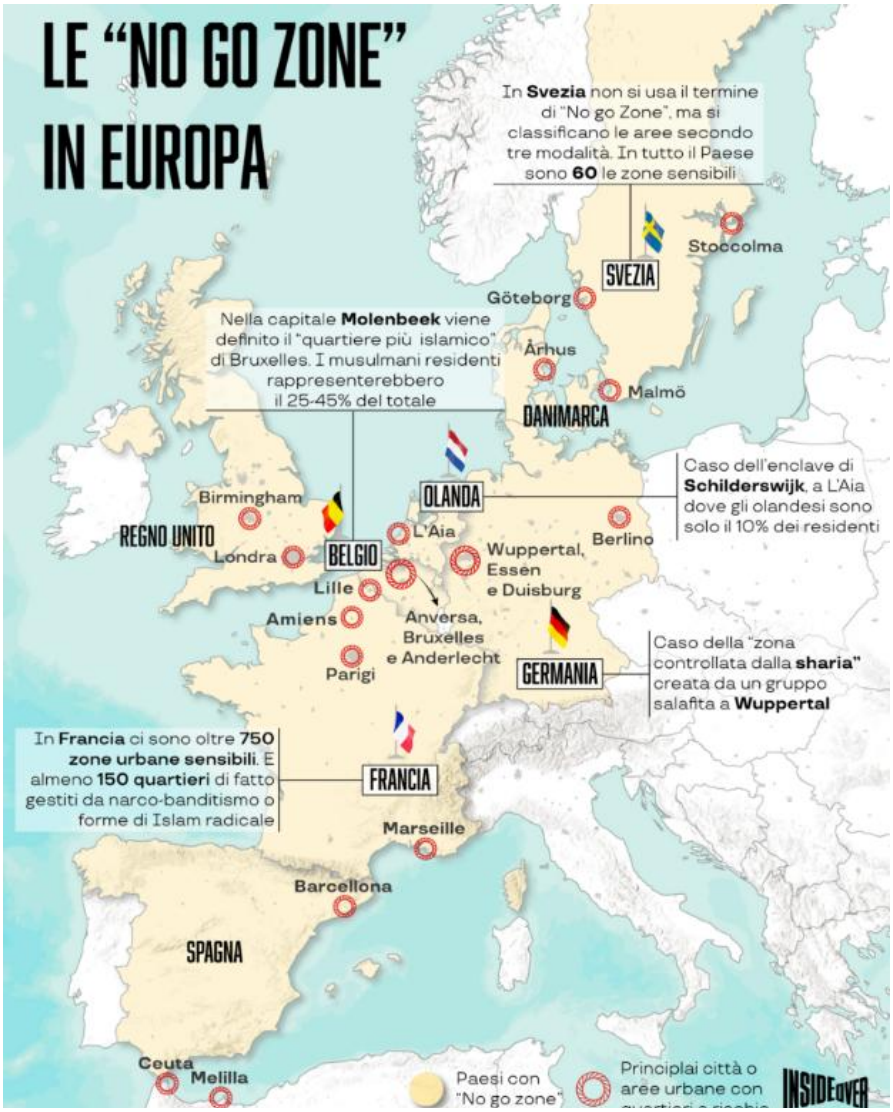
LE "NO GO ZONE" IN EUROPA
In Svezia non si usa il termine di "No go Zone", ma si classificano le aree secondo tre modalità. In tutto il Paese sono 60 le zone sensibili
Stoccolma
SVEZIA
Göteborg
Nella capitale Molenbeek viene definito il "quartiere più islamico" di Bruxelles. I musulmani residenti rappresenterebbero il 25-45% del totale
Århus
Malmö
DANIMARCA
OLANDA
Caso dell'enclave di Schilderswijk, a L'Aia dove gli olandesi sono solo il 10% dei residenti
Birmingham
REGNO UNITO
Londra
BELGIO
L'Aia
Berlino
Wuppertal, Essen e Duisburg
Lille
Amiens
Anversa, Bruxelles e Anderlecht
Parigi
GERMANIA
Caso della "zona controllata dalla sharia" creata da un gruppo salafita a Wuppertal
In Francia ci sono oltre 750 zone urbane sensibili. E almeno 150 quartieri di fatto gestiti da narco-banditismo o forme di Islam radicale
FRANCIA
Marseille
Barcellona
SPAGNA
Ceuta
Melilla
Paesi con "No go zone"
Principlai città o aree urbane con
INSIDEOVER

Image 2: Map of "No-Go Zones" in Western Europe (Source: Pietrobon 2021)

David Ignatius, writing in The New York Times, described some areas of Paris as having become "no-go zones at night" (Ignatius 2002). Even French President Emmanuel Macron, in a television interview, stated that foreigners, either illegal immigrants or those awaiting residence permits, account for more than half of the crime in the capital. To illustrate his point, Macron said: "If we look at crime in Paris today, we cannot fail to see that at least half of the crime comes from people who are foreigners, either illegal immigrants or waiting for a residence permit. In any case, they're in a very delicate situation, often coming in through these (illegal immigration) channels" (Lesueur 2022).

Former French Socialist President François Hollande also expressed concern over this phenomenon, asking, "How can we prevent secession?" He was referring to the emergence of neighborhoods, districts, and areas within cities where the law is no longer effectively enforced and where Western cultural norms have largely disappeared, replaced by alternative authorities

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such as the supremacy of Sharia law, widespread banditry, and a lack of public services due to the threat of violence.

Alain Chouet, the former deputy head of the French foreign intelligence agency, recently published a book titled "Sept pas vers l'enfer" ("Seven Steps to Hell"), in which he describes a society deeply entangled in Islamic fundamentalist violence. In 1,514 neighborhoods, access to security forces, emergency services, and medical and social services is effectively prohibited. These districts are located in 859 cities and are home to approximately 4 million people, or 6% of France's total population. Chouet warns that mistakes in immigration policy carry serious consequences (Meotti 2022).

The ongoing discourse surrounding secession in Europe highlights a complex interplay of political recognition and societal challenges. Angela Merkel's acknowledgment of this phenomenon represents a critical admission that cannot be overlooked. At the same time, François Hollande's probing questions about the effectiveness of preventative measures underscore the urgency of addressing the underlying issues. Furthermore, the repercussions of mismanaged immigration policies illustrate that the path toward societal cohesion is fraught with difficulties requiring thoughtful deliberation and decisive action.

This concern is echoed by Rainer Wendt, president of Europe's largest police union, who stated: "We are confronting an unparalleled challenge in post-war history." Wendt warned that the possibility of collapse is "extremely tangible" and that police have lost control of the situation. He acknowledged, "Radical Islamists are questioning the power on our streets. If no action is taken, Sharia law will prevail instead of the constitution. It is time to return to the fundamental values of our societies. Otherwise, the country will collapse and the law of the strongest will prevail" (Meotti and Sheva 2024).

In Germany, following a court order, the government of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the country's most populous state, complied with an information request from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party regarding neighborhoods and streets officially designated by police as "dangerous zones" over the past decade. The official list identifies 44 areas, of which only ten remain of particular concern today. Nearly all of these locations have significant immigrant populations (Federal Criminal Police [BKA] 2020).

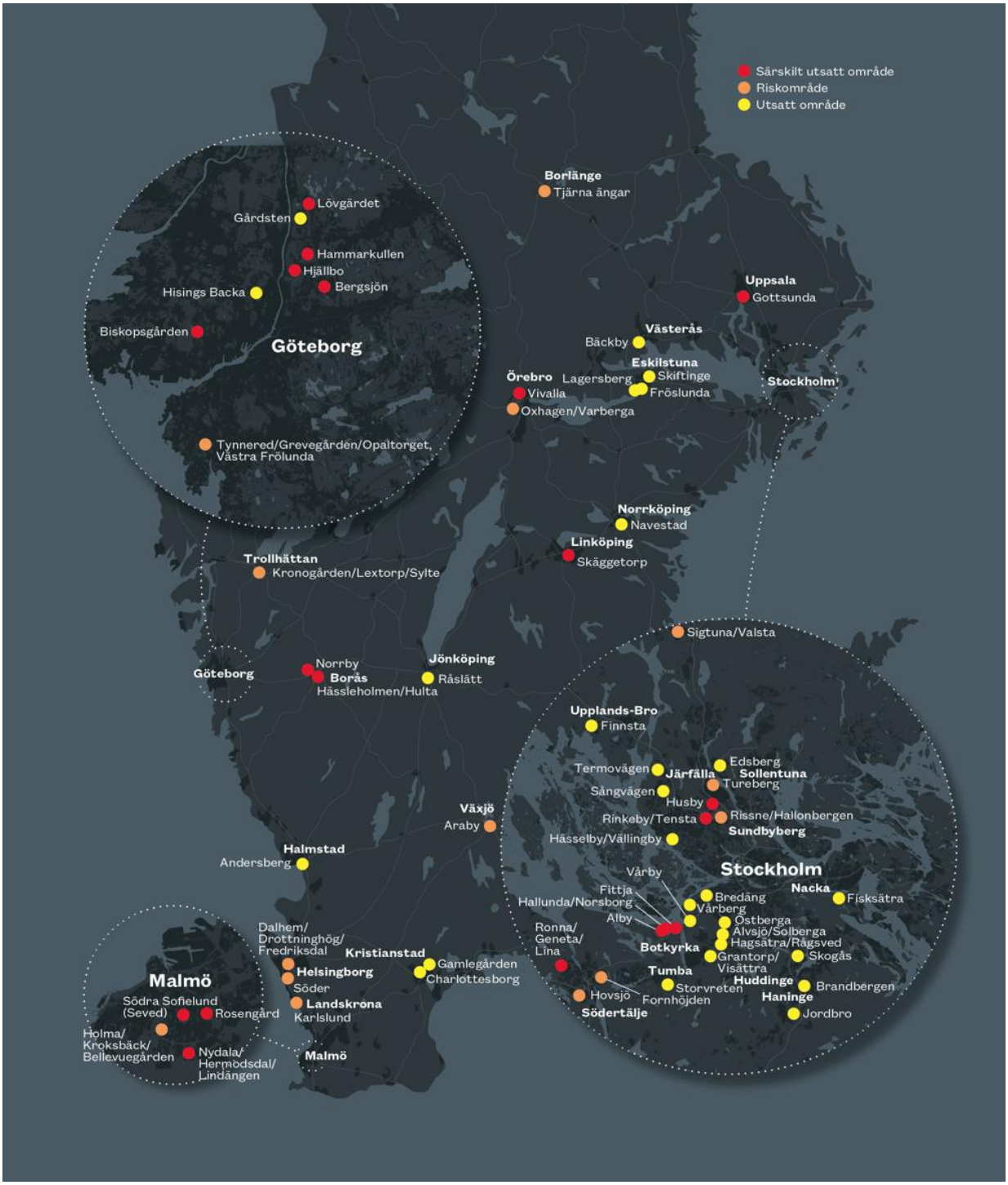
However, the issue is not confined to Germany. The stability and integrity of Europe are threatened by numerous small and large enclaves that function as genuine parallel states. For example, authorities in Amsterdam have mapped out 40 no-go areas in the Netherlands.

The debate over neighborhoods that stand out negatively compared to the rest of society remains a significant issue in urban politics (Wacquant 2008).

In Sweden, significant integration challenges include criminal activity, honor-based violence and oppression, unemployment, reliance on social benefits, and the emergence of rival societies. The country's new integration policy emphasizes that individuals living in Sweden are responsible for assimilating into Swedish society. Everyone is expected to be self-reliant, proficient in Swedish, understand how Sweden functions, and demonstrate respect for national norms, standards, and values.

Compared to many other countries, Sweden has clear criteria for identifying neighborhoods for specific classifications. Since 2015, the Swedish police have identified neighborhoods characterized by socio-economic disadvantage, ethnic segregation, and high levels of criminal activity. These neighborhoods are categorized as "vulnerable," "at risk," or

"particularly vulnerable" (See Figure 2). In the latter category, challenges are so severe that residents are often unwilling to testify in criminal cases, and alternative social governance structures may emerge, complicating everyday policing efforts.



Note: yellow=vulnerable; orange=at risk; red=particularly vulnerable

Figure 2: Sweden's Police-Identified Vulnerable Neighborhoods (Source: Svensk Polis 2019)

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The police list has faced criticism for relying on subjective criteria, stigmatizing communities, and overlooking other marginalized populations; nonetheless, it holds a crucial place in national political discourse (Gerell et al. 2022).

The 2021 list identifies 61 vulnerable neighborhoods, 19 of which are classified as "particularly vulnerable." Most are located in the metropolitan areas of Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö, but several are also found in smaller cities in southern and central Sweden (Brå 2025).

According to Rothwell (2025), a recent study found that over two-thirds of convicted rapists in Sweden are migrants or second-generation immigrants. Researchers at Lund University reported that 63% of convictions for rape or attempted rape involved individuals born abroad or to parents born abroad. The study analyzed 4,000 convictions from 2000 to 2024 and indicated that the longer a foreigner has resided in Sweden, the lower their likelihood of committing rape. Mr. Khoshnood noted that rape convictions were more common among migrants who had lived in Sweden for less than five years.

These developments suggest that Europe's open-border policies are creating zones where social cohesion is under severe strain. When renowned political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, a professor at Harvard and Columbia Universities, published "The Clash of Civilizations" in 1993, he argued that future international conflicts would arise primarily from cultural and religious identities, with Islamic civilization potentially posing the most significant challenge to Western dominance. Huntington identified civilizations as the highest and broadest level of cultural identity, surpassing nation-states as the primary actors in international relations. He proposed that the most significant distinctions among people are cultural and religious, and that future conflicts would occur along these "fault lines" between civilizations. His theory directly challenges Francis Fukuyama's thesis in "The End of History," which predicted the universal triumph of liberal democracy following the Cold War (Thompson 2018).

The pressing issue is that European governments appear to have concluded that it is too late to prevent the current migration crisis. As a result, they seem to believe that the only viable course of action is to mitigate its effects in the short term while hoping that the resulting social and political challenges remain limited to certain areas, preferably outside their own jurisdictions.

WILL THE NEW PACT SHAPE EUROPE'S MIGRATION AND ASYLUM POLICIES?

The implications of the migrant policy crisis were felt throughout the EU, affecting the capacity of European asylum reception systems and mainstream public institutions, including welfare, employment, and education sectors. The substantial influx of refugees and other migrants prompted reactions across multiple policy areas and at various geographic and political levels. The 2015 crisis continues to influence European migration and asylum policies for the foreseeable future (Kraler et al. 2022).

The EU asylum system has long struggled with an imbalance between EU Member States' responsibilities for asylum seekers under the Dublin rules and the need for solidarity in addressing their consequences. The new agreement on migration and asylum reforms, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, seeks to address this imbalance by creating a necessary but

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flexible system for sharing responsibilities among countries under the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation.

In September 2020, after multiple delays and unproductive negotiations, the European Commission formally introduced the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. In addition to implementing enhanced procedures, the pact proposes that, in the interest of solidarity, EU Member States share the burden of managing migrant and refugee inflows and subsequent asylum claims. The concept of solidarity is emphasized through a novel framework for equitable distribution of responsibilities, incorporating "a new solidarity mechanism to instill fairness within the EU asylum system, acknowledging the diverse challenges posed by varying geographical contexts." This mechanism will primarily focus on relocation or return sponsorship (European Commission 2020).

The official press release acknowledges that "[t]he current system no longer functions. For the past five years, the EU has been unable to resolve the issue." In response, the new agreement was presented as "a fresh start" and, as EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson explained, is intended to "establish a long-term migration policy that can convert European values into practical management" (European Commission 2020a).

Under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, all EU countries are required to contribute in proportion to their population and GDP, helping to ease the burden on countries considered "under migratory pressure," primarily those in southern Europe.

While the pact aims to create a more efficient and cohesive approach to migration management, it has faced significant criticism for potential adverse effects on human rights, access to asylum, and the treatment of vulnerable individuals. In May 2024, the European Union formally adopted the Pact on Migration and Asylum to address the escalating migrant crisis. The pact outlines procedures for handling individuals attempting to enter the EU illegally.

Key provisions include the evaluation of asylum seekers at entry points and prompt expulsion following the rejection of asylum applications. The most controversial element is the mandatory solidarity mechanism, which requires the EU to relocate a minimum of 30,000 migrants annually, obligating recipient Member States to accept and provide for a designated number of asylum seekers. Nations that refuse to admit migrants are subject to a fee of €20,000 per migrant (Sorgi and Barigazzi 2023).

DISCUSSION

The tension between Europe's open-door migration policy and the concept of "Fortress Europe," or closed-border strategies, reflects the EU's ongoing struggle to reconcile humanitarian ideals with political pragmatism and border security. While the open-door approach embodies Europe's commitment to human rights, international protection, and solidarity, most visibly during the 2015 refugee crisis, it has also exposed deep divisions among EU Member States, overwhelmed infrastructure, and triggered social and political backlash.

Conversely, the "Fortress Europe" strategy emphasizes border security, cultural cohesion, and the protection of national interests and identity. Critically, both approaches reveal an unsustainable dichotomy. A purely open-door policy without adequate structural support can invite political instability, while a strictly closed-border approach fails to address the root causes of migration. Europe's attempts to keep migrants out are unlikely to succeed unless

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accompanied by substantial investment in development in the countries from which refugees are fleeing. Addressing the challenges of irregular migration, integration, and asylum management requires a nuanced strategy that balances compassion with effective control.

Migration has been a defining force in shaping modern Europe, influencing demographics, economies, and cultural landscapes. This paper has traced how the crisis measures adopted in 2015 became embedded in the EU's governing approach to migration, with Germany, Sweden, and Hungary serving as illustrative examples. The study examines how national identity, geopolitical factors, and the 2015–2016 refugee crisis have influenced immigration policies in these countries, highlighting broader divisions within Europe regarding migration.

Germany, long associated with humanitarian values, initially pursued an open-door policy under Chancellor Angela Merkel. However, as populism gained traction, security concerns intensified, and resources became strained, the country adopted stricter measures, particularly through the 2020 Immigration Act. Sweden, once seen as a model of liberal immigration policy, faced significant challenges in social integration and assimilation, prompting stricter asylum regulations and restrictions on family reunification. In contrast, Hungary, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has maintained a rigorously anti-immigration stance, leveraging the crisis to reinforce national identity and reject EU initiatives designed to promote solidarity and shared responsibility.

CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, twenty-nine million immigrants, both legal and illegal, have arrived in Europe, placing immense pressure on the continent's already overstretched and largely dysfunctional immigration system. By the end of 2022, Europe hosted one in three refugees worldwide (36%). The number of refugees residing in Europe rose from 7 million at the end of 2021 to 12.4 million by the close of 2022. In 2023 alone, approximately 4.5 million immigrants entered Europe, 3.5 million through legal channels and 1 million illegally. This substantial influx has made immigration one of the most influential factors shaping contemporary European politics.

The ongoing migration flow into Europe necessitates effective measures to address the crisis rather than maintaining the current *status quo*. The intricate relationship between humanitarian values and security imperatives underscores the complexity of the issue, demanding a nuanced and cohesive response. One of the strongest arguments in favor of an open-door migration policy is its economic benefit. Migrants often fill critical labor shortages, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, and technology. Their contributions can foster innovation, expand the tax base, and increase overall productivity. While humanitarian motives often drive open-door migration policies, they can carry profound negative implications if not carefully planned and implemented, including economic strain, social friction, political polarization, and security concerns.

These diverse approaches illustrate the ongoing challenge of balancing national interests with humanitarian obligations, an equilibrium that many EU Member States still struggle to achieve. The inconsistent responses to immigration in Germany, Sweden, and Hungary highlight

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the urgent need for unified and flexible EU policies that account for both the internal challenges faced by EU Member States and the broader geopolitical landscape.

Integration is a process that requires refugees and migrants to adapt and acclimate to the culture of their new home, rather than the other way around. In 2002, the UN Refugee Agency defined integration as a "dynamic and multifaceted two-way process which requires efforts by all parties concerned, including a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse population" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2002). This definition emphasizes that integration is a two-way process encompassing interrelated legal, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, all of which are crucial for migrants to become fully included members of society.

For migration policies to be sustainable, they must balance compassion with capacity, ensuring that newcomers can integrate successfully while maintaining public trust and social stability. The rapid influx of migrants and asylum seekers into Europe has reignited debates about European cultural identity and the methods for incorporating foreigners into society. Concerns about preserving European identity during acculturation drive much of this discussion, raising questions about a "guiding culture" and a "welcoming culture."

Ultimately, Europe's response to migration will shape not only its demographic future but also its identity as a union committed to human rights, solidarity, and global responsibility.

CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Larisa Vasileska: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft. **Ivona Shushak-Lozanovska:** conceptualization, methodology, data curation, writing – review and editing.

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Nuclear Deterrence and Crisis Stability in South Asia: The India-Pakistan Case Study

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Abstract
Amid ongoing global challenges, the potential escalation of the India–Pakistan conflict into a large-scale war poses a serious threat to both regional and global security. This study examines the security risks arising from the India–Pakistan conflict and the likelihood of future escalation. The paper aims to analyze the impact of this conflict on regional and global security, with particular emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons as a central and persistent challenge. The research finds that balance-of-power theory and nuclear deterrence policies play a significant role in maintaining strategic stability between India and Pakistan. The article concludes that while nuclear weapons reduce the probability of a large-scale conventional war, they simultaneously introduce substantial risks that continue to threaten regional and international security.

Keywords
India–Pakistan Conflict; Nuclear Weapons; Regional Security; Global Security; Nuclear Deterrence; Balance of Power; Strategic Stability

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the scale of global threats has increased due to the development of new technologies, ongoing military-political conflicts, asymmetric and hybrid threats, and information and economic wars. As a result, maintaining global security is becoming increasingly challenging. These developments provide both states and non-state actors with significant opportunities, which require states to implement substantial reforms in the military sphere to counter and neutralize these threats effectively.

The nature of war is evolving, and accordingly, states must develop more effective strategies and military tactics to address emerging threats and challenges. Achieving global security and maintaining stability are essential to prevent new conflicts from arising and to stop frozen conflicts from escalating into active hostilities, which could destabilize the existing security architecture and lead to widespread chaos.

The formation of a new world order has a profound impact on both regional and global security. In times of global disorder and systemic imbalance, asymmetric threats become more prominent, and frozen conflicts can quickly flare up into acute crises. Consequently, states must navigate a complex geopolitical environment, defending themselves against both internal and external threats.

Amid these political processes, a significant challenge to ongoing military confrontations worldwide is the risk of nuclear weapons use. To preserve strategic stability, it is crucial to

minimize the risks associated with nuclear weapons, particularly when they are held by authoritarian and aggressive states such as North Korea and Russia.

In light of ongoing global developments, it is important to study and analyze the Indo-Pakistani conflict, which, due to its unique characteristics, significantly affects regional security and, if escalated, could pose a global security threat. The India-Pakistan conflict is a multidimensional, deeply rooted geopolitical challenge with substantial implications for regional and international security, potentially leading to highly unmanageable situations in the future. Accordingly, studying this conflict is essential, given its complexity and its impact on multiple aspects of security. Understanding these interconnected issues is crucial for evaluating South Asian security policy and assessing prospects for regional stability.

The research problem addressed in this article is the threat posed by the Indo-Pakistani conflict at the regional and global levels, particularly the potential use of nuclear weapons. The main research question is: What role do nuclear weapons play in the Indo-Pakistani conflict? Given the current global environment, this article analyzes the impact of the Indo-Pakistani conflict on regional and international security, with a focus on nuclear security, which poses significant risks and challenges to global stability. This study is important for examining existing regional security policies in South Asia, understanding the role of nuclear weapons, and evaluating the extent to which regional developments may affect global security. The article also explores the dynamics of Indo-Pakistani relations in the context of nuclear policy and their implications for achieving regional stability.

The India-Pakistan conflict originates from the partition of India, which resulted in the formation of two sovereign states with ongoing territorial disputes, particularly over the Kashmir region. This dispute has caused multiple wars and remains a source of persistent tension, exacerbating distrust and hostility. The military capabilities of India and Pakistan reflect their struggle for strategic advantage, manifesting in a regional arms race. This dynamic creates a fragile balance that helps prevent a full-scale conventional conflict. Peace in the region and globally is increasingly at risk due to the modernization and expansion of nuclear arsenals in both India and Pakistan. Rising tensions over the contested territory of Kashmir have heightened the possibility of confrontation between these nuclear-armed states (CND UK 2025a).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of theoretical and empirical literature has addressed nuclear security since 1945. Within this context, the India-Pakistan conflict occupies a significant place. The standoff between India and Pakistan is strategically important for nuclear security, as it has a significant impact on the strategic stability of South Asia and regional security more broadly. Consequently, this issue warrants extensive academic research.

Given the complex dynamics in the region and the broader international security environment, scholarly attention has focused on nuclear policy and international security. Henry Kissinger (2015), for example, devotes significant attention to nuclear security policy and the threat of nuclear weapons proliferation in his book "World Order," where he examines in detail the implications of nuclear weapons for regional and global security. Similarly, Kenneth Waltz highlights the importance of nuclear security policy and the sustainability of nuclear deterrence,

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noting that they largely depend on the cooperation or confrontation among nuclear states, as well as the dynamics of their relationships within the current geopolitical context.

John Gill (2004) emphasizes the growing assertiveness of Indian policy and the resulting uncertainty, which compels Pakistan to enhance its military capabilities as part of balance-of-power dynamics. Two other important contributions by Jordan Seng and David J. Karl provide compelling arguments for the viability of nuclear deterrence, grounded in careful examinations of specific case studies (Ganguly and Kapur 2010a).

In their book "Nuclear Deterrence and Stability in South Asia: Perceptions and Realities" (2021), Antoine Levesques, Desmond Bowen, and John H. Gill analyze the Indo-Pakistani nuclear doctrine, strategic stability policies, nuclear weapons risks, and the threats posed by evolving military capabilities. The authors also examine deterrence strategies, the regional arms race, and associated risks, offering a significant contribution to the study of nuclear security policy in South Asia.

Another key source is "Versus: India vs Pakistan – The Line of Control Wars: A Modern Military History of South Asia's Deadliest Rivalry" (Blackbird House 2025), which examines recent developments in Indo-Pakistani relations. The book provides an in-depth analysis of the Kashmir conflict, highlighting the roles of nationalism, non-state actors, and the threat posed by nuclear weapons since 1947.

David Dravid (2025), in "Borders of Trust: Rethinking India–Pakistan Relations in the Nuclear Age," explores the Indo-Pakistani rivalry and the potential use of nuclear weapons in the event of war. He emphasizes that even a small spark could escalate into a global catastrophe, analyzing the historical rivalry, military capabilities, and nuclear-related security policies of both states.

Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur (2010), in "India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia," discuss the historical and theoretical context of nuclear proliferation in the region. They provide an overview of the origins of the India-Pakistan conflict and its role in shaping nuclear policy, highlighting political and academic debates on the impact of nuclear weapons. However, their work does not explicitly address the implications of the ongoing conflict for international nuclear security.

Akshat Upadhyay (2019), in "Coercive Diplomacy Against Pakistan: Options and Effectiveness in Non-Nuclear Conflict Space in Contemporary Times," examines the 1998 Kargil incident and the broader dynamics of the Indo-Pakistani conflict in Jammu and Kashmir. While insightful, his analysis requires updating to reflect the current geopolitical situation and the evolving threats posed by the conflict to regional and international security.

Bilal Zubair and Zain Rashid Tarar (2025) examine the political processes and trends shaping India's military modernization and their consequences for South Asian security. Their work analyzes the differing priorities and objectives of India and Pakistan, which often lead to confrontation. The authors focus on the security dilemma in South Asia, the military doctrines of both countries, and the role of nuclear weapons in shaping India-Pakistan relations. They highlight India's growing militarization as part of an ongoing arms race, which poses challenges to achieving strategic stability in the region. Consequently, their work makes a significant contribution to the research process, providing a basis for analytical discussion and informed conclusions.

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These studies are important for understanding the dynamics of political processes between India and Pakistan, how states respond in different political situations under the shadow of nuclear weapons, and the implications for domestic and foreign policy decision-making. They also shed light on the contours of regional and international security in the context of nuclear capabilities, using South Asia as a case study. Despite the extensive literature on the topic, the issue of nuclear security arising from the India-Pakistan confrontation remains underexplored at a scientific level, and empirical studies are limited. This work aims to outline better the role of nuclear weapons in the Indo-Pakistani conflict, assess the realism of their potential use, and analyze the threats this situation poses to regional and global security.

METHODOLOGY

The paper employs a qualitative research design that integrates policy analysis, content analysis, comparative analysis, and SWOT analysis. These methods are applied within the framework of four interconnected theoretical approaches: securitization theory, deterrence theory, regional security complexes theory, and balance-of-power theory. The study seeks to answer two central questions:

1. What role do nuclear weapons play in the India-Pakistan conflict?
2. Are nuclear weapons an effective deterrent against a large-scale military war between India and Pakistan?

The research focuses on critical events that have significantly influenced security dynamics between India and Pakistan. Both primary sources (including political documents, official government statements, and agreements) and secondary sources (such as scholarly articles, books, and expert interviews) are analyzed.

This paper systematically examines the risks and threats to nuclear security arising from the Indo-Pakistani confrontation through the lens of security studies. Using political analysis, the study investigates the causes, dynamics, and roles of the parties involved in the conflict. To assess the role of nuclear weapons in political relations, the political strategies and actions of the conflicting parties are analyzed, providing insights into how each might respond in a crisis. The analysis also considers regional security factors, the dynamics of political processes, and the prevailing conditions during specific historical periods.

Using the content analysis method, recent events were examined, and the reactions and actions of the Indian and Pakistani governments during the conflict were analyzed. Political statements made by decision-makers and the circumstances surrounding the conflict were assessed, revealing its deep-rooted nature. The decision-making processes and official statements regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons were also examined, raising significant concerns.

The comparative analysis method was employed, which enabled the military potential and capabilities of India and Pakistan to be evaluated. The current balance of power in military terms was assessed, as significant disruption could corner either side. This factor may influence decisions regarding the use of nuclear weapons when no alternative exists in the face of an existential threat.

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The SWOT analysis was applied to identify and assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to nuclear security in the context of the Indo-Pakistani conflict. Overall, this approach allowed for a more thorough assessment of the current security situation and informed the study's conclusions. Notably, the study focused on analyzing the threats posed by nuclear weapons at the national, regional, international, and global levels, with both comparative and SWOT analyses playing a critical role.

The research process of this paper applies securitization theory, deterrence theory, regional security complexes theory, and balance of power theory to analyze the existing security environment between India and Pakistan and emerging nuclear security threats.

In the modern era, the world faces a multitude of constantly evolving threats and challenges, ranging from terrorism, pandemics, and wars to cyberattacks, climate change, and economic instability. Traditional approaches to security studies often fall short in capturing the complexity of this instability, as they primarily focus on military threats and nation-states. Accordingly, securitization theory provides a dynamic and critical framework for studying security issues in this changing landscape (Otukoya 2024, 1747).

The Copenhagen School developed the concept of "securitization" to examine how governments and other influential actors perceive certain events as existential threats and justify taking extraordinary measures to counter them. Members of the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, particularly Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, often referred to as the "Copenhagen School", developed the concept in response to debates in the 1990s over the meaning of "security" (Flohr 2025). This study employs securitization theory to analyze how India and Pakistan frame terrorist attacks as existential threats to justify military responses.

In international relations, deterrence theory is a fundamental concept, particularly in security and conflict studies. Deterrence, rooted in the idea that threats can prevent adversaries from taking undesirable actions, seeks to maintain stability by convincing opponents that the costs of aggression outweigh any potential benefits. Deterrence theory was initially developed during the Cold War to manage nuclear conflicts but has since been expanded to address a variety of threats in international relations, including terrorism, cybercrime, and conventional military aggression (CIRIS 2025a). Nuclear deterrence focuses explicitly on the use of nuclear weapons to prevent aggression. The "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD) doctrine exemplifies this approach, asserting that a nuclear attack would provoke guaranteed, devastating retaliation by the targeted state, thereby deterring first strikes (CIRIS 2025b). This study applies nuclear deterrence theory to analyze the role of nuclear weapons in the Indo-Pakistan conflict and the factors that prevent the outbreak of a full-scale war.

The concept of security complexes, developed by Buzan and Wæver, provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks for analyzing the key variables necessary for regional security assessment. The expanded version of this concept offers a grand theoretical framework that has been applied to nearly every region of the global system (Buzan and Wæver 2003). While the core assumptions of regional security complexes theory (RSCT) have remained essentially unchanged, they continue to provide opportunities for research on regional security and demonstrate the theory's validity as a widely used analytical tool (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998, 10). Actors in international relations are influenced by emerging challenges, which shape their perceptions of risks, opportunities, and threats. Regional security complexes theory, as a tool for analyzing regional security, reflects this dynamic. In this study, RSCT was employed to

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examine regional security policy in the Indo-Pakistani conflict, leading to the identification of the primary factors and threats driving the conflict.

A "balance of power" system is one in which the authority possessed and exercised by states is restrained and counterbalanced by the authority of other states. When a nation's power grows to the point of threatening other powerful states, counterbalancing coalitions form to prevent the emergence of global hegemony. A balance of power system requires at least two or more actors of roughly equal strength, governments that seek to survive and maintain their independence, flexible alliances, and the capacity to engage in war if necessary (Schweller 2016).

Based on structural realism, as advanced by Kenneth Waltz in "Theory of International Politics" (1979), the self-help anarchic system and shifts in the relative distribution of capabilities lead to the recurrent formation of balances of power in the international system (Ejituwu, Obi, and Ojinnaka 2024, 39). The balancing actions of states are consistently aimed at ensuring security, which can result in opposing behaviors among them. Waltz articulates the relationship between security and power, noting: "Excessive weakness may provoke an attack that greater strength would have deterred an adversary from initiating. Excessive power may compel other nations to augment their armaments and consolidate their efforts against the preeminent state" (Waltz 1988, 615).

This study applies the balance-of-power theory to analyze the impact of the Indo-Pakistani conflict on the international system and regional security. Questions concerning nuclear security between India and Pakistan, and their influence on regional and international stability, are examined using the aforementioned theoretical approaches.

INDIA-PAKISTAN CONFLICT APRIL–MAY 2025: NUCLEAR RISKS AND ESCALATION

The India-Pakistan conflict is one of the longest-running and most complex in modern international relations. It first emerged during the Kashmir War of 1947–1948, which began shortly after the partition of British India. The conflict was rooted in historical disagreements, ideological differences, territorial disputes, and struggles for power, dynamics further shaped by regional and global actors alongside national forces (Wenning 2003).

The Second Kashmir War began in 1965 when Pakistan fomented an insurgency in the Indian-controlled region of Kashmir. The conflict escalated into open warfare and ended with the Tashkent Agreement of 1966. However, the underlying causes remained unresolved, paving the way for further conflicts (Jauhari 2012).

The third war, known as the Bangladesh Liberation War, started in 1971 when Pakistani repression forced millions of refugees to flee to India. In response, India intervened militarily in East Pakistan (Misson 2023a). The war concluded with Pakistan's surrender and the recognition of Bangladesh's independence.

In 1999, the nuclear powers engaged in a military standoff in the Kargil region of India involving Pakistani forces and Kashmiri militants (Zeb 2021). India successfully repelled the incursion, but the conflict highlighted the persistent threat of nuclear escalation and the fragility of regional stability.

Tensions resurfaced following the attacks on the Indian Parliament in 2001 and in Mumbai in 2008 (Dravid 2025). Military clashes continued in 2016 and 2019, with India launching airstrikes in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. In 2019, India conducted airstrikes in

Pakistan in response to the Pulwama attack and later revoked Kashmir's special autonomous status, further escalating tensions (Pandya 2019).

The presence of nuclear weapons in both states makes the current situation even more dangerous. India described the events as asymmetric warfare, although Pakistan denies any involvement. Broadly, the roots of the dispute between India and Pakistan lie in the region's colonial past, which evolved into ideological and territorial disagreements and ongoing confrontations. While Kashmir remains at the core of the conflict, it is only one component of a larger, systemic struggle. Achieving lasting peace requires a comprehensive examination, careful analysis, and gradual resolution of all elements of the conflict.

In modern times, the threat of nuclear weapon use has been heightened by the escalation of the traditional India-Pakistan conflict. This is not merely a regional issue: a large-scale war between the two countries could seriously compromise global security. The crisis that emerged between India and Pakistan in April 2025 represents both the culmination of a unique international environment, characterized by polarization, inconsistencies, confrontational rhetoric, widespread challenges to the status quo, and global rearmament, and the predictable continuation of a historically multifaceted conflict (Misson 2023b).

Tensions escalated sharply after the events of April 22, 2025, when gunmen in Kashmir opened fire on tourists in the Pahalghan meadow, killing 26 people and wounding 17. The little-known group "Kashmir Resistance" claimed responsibility for the attack. The Indian government blamed Pakistan, which Islamabad denied, requesting third-party assistance in the investigation. In response, India revoked visas for Pakistani citizens, downgraded diplomatic relations, urged its citizens to leave Pakistan, closed the only land crossing between the two countries, and suspended the agreement regulating water distribution from the Indus River (Clary 2025a).

In turn, Pakistan suspended visas for Indian citizens, declared military advisors at Indian diplomatic missions persona non grata, closed its airspace to Indian airlines, and warned that any attempt to halt the flow of water from the Indus River would be considered an act of war, with a corresponding response.

On May 7, 2025, India launched a missile strike on Pakistan and its administered region of Kashmir, which was followed by a terrorist attack in Pahalgam. After a month of escalating tensions, including missile strikes, the downing of fighter jets, and public confrontations between political leaders, India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire (Matoi 2025a). The situation had brought both countries to the brink of war, although a ceasefire was finally established on May 10.

Peace between the neighboring states was achieved through negotiations between their leaders and the intervention of external actors. However, this temporary cessation of hostilities may serve as a prelude to another escalation. The conflict could resurface in a different form in the future, potentially triggering a new confrontation.

The current standoff between Pakistan and India is not merely a local tension between two states. Both countries are nuclear powers, and their conflict poses a potential challenge to the international system. This risk is heightened by the fact that neither state has signed the UN General Assembly resolution on the prohibition of nuclear weapons (Curtis 2025a). Their position is understandable in this context, as both countries lack robust security guarantees, making nuclear weapons their primary tool for maintaining security.

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The recent kinetic actions between India and Pakistan in May 2025 have undermined the notion of India's "new normal" and reasserted the concept of deterrence in the region.

After a terrorist incident in Pahalgam, Kashmir, in early 2025, India announced the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, further escalating tensions. It is important to briefly examine the Indus Waters Treaty, signed in 1960 and unviolated during the previous Indo-Pakistani wars. In this case, India's policy shifted following the conflict, as it blocked the Indus River at its source, causing the water levels in the three branches flowing into Pakistan to drop significantly (Curtis 2025b). If India does not restore the water supply, Pakistan's agriculture could be devastated, pushing millions of people to the brink of starvation.

The Indus River originates in the Tibetan mountains and splits into six branches, three of which flow into Pakistan and three into India. India's water management policy thus carries the potential to spark another conflict between the two rival states.

Modern international politics continues to exhibit signs of bloc divisions. Despite the end of the Cold War, the distribution of regional and global spheres of influence persists, and the global order is changing, reminiscent of a new Cold War. Current examples include the Russia-Ukraine war and other unstable regional processes worldwide. The India-Pakistan confrontation illustrates how geopolitical approaches to conflict are evolving.

India, with its demographic strength and growing economy, is a strategic partner for the West, particularly the United States, which views India as a key lever to balance China in the Asia-Pacific region. Conversely, Pakistan maintains close ties with China, driven not only by geostrategic considerations against India but also by economic interests, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Matoi 2025a). This partnership provides Beijing with dual strategic advantages: geopolitical leverage against India and facilitation of China's regional expansion.

The India-Pakistan conflict, while primarily regional, carries potential global implications. Nuclear weapons, control over regional water resources, and ongoing terrorist threats create a complex security challenge that requires careful monitoring and preventive measures. A major terrorist attack in a sensitive area such as Pahalgam could trigger a future crisis, potentially prompting India to reconsider its position on the Indus Waters Treaty.

The crisis demonstrated how rapidly tensions between nuclear-armed powers can escalate. Drones were used in combat for the first time in the region, marking a new phase of technological warfare. Pakistan underscored its nuclear capabilities and issued a "double signal" through military countermeasures as the crisis intensified. The incident drew renewed international attention to South Asia's security and highlighted the importance of active dialogue and confidence-building measures during both crises and periods of peace.

Uncertainty has been heightened by India's changing no-first-use (NFU) stance and Pakistan's first-use nuclear policy (Curtis 2025c). As a result, crisis instability persists, fueled by brinkmanship in which both nations test the limits of escalation. This often necessitates third-party mediation, with China and the United States playing key roles in defusing tensions during the India-Pakistan conflict.

New forms of coercion have also emerged, including cyber deterrence, as both sides engage in hacking and disinformation campaigns. While deterrence has so far averted full-scale war, the strategic security of South Asia remains threatened by cross-border conflicts, recurring crises, and acts of terrorism (Raeesa and Akhtar 2025a).

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Nuclear deterrence is essential for regional stability, helping to mitigate the significant security risks in South Asia. Although it has prevented full-scale conflicts since 1998, the possibility of miscalculation remains. The Pulwama-Balakot crisis in 2019 and the Pahalgam incident leading to air strikes in May 2025 illustrate how traditional conflicts can rapidly escalate into dangerous confrontations (Raeesa and Akhtar 2025b). The absence of effective crisis management frameworks and arms control mechanisms exacerbates regional instability, leaving the area vulnerable to sudden military escalation. Non-state actors and cross-border terrorist activity further destabilize the region.

From a realist perspective, states act rationally and are guided primarily by national interests rather than universal moral principles. The Kashmir conflict remains frozen but unresolved, as both India and Pakistan continue to claim the disputed territory. Consequently, future Indo-Pakistani standoffs remain a distinct possibility. Multiple unresolved issues continue to drive confrontation, making the India-Pakistan conflict a serious challenge to both regional and international security.

COMPARING THE MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN

The Indo-Pakistani military confrontation has been a defining feature of South Asian geopolitics since 1947. The military capabilities of both countries have evolved significantly over time, reflecting ongoing political tensions and the expansion of their strategic potential. This evolution in military armaments highlights the strategic priorities and security concerns that are strongly shaped by national politics, regional dynamics, and broader international political processes.

To accurately assess their military potential, it is essential to examine their military doctrines, force size, conventional capabilities, nuclear arsenals, and defense procurement trends. India's efforts to modernize its military are aimed at enhancing its regional dominance, particularly vis-à-vis Pakistan. Recent defense expenditures reflect shifts in geopolitics, economic conditions, and strategic priorities. As part of an increased defense budget of USD 77.8 billion for 2024–2025 (see Figure 1), India allocated USD 19.64 billion specifically for the acquisition of advanced weapons and technologies in the fiscal year 2024 (Blackbird House 2025).

Figure 1: India's Total Defense Budget (Billion USD) and Annual Growth, 2021–2030f (Source: Ministry of Defense, India, GlobalData Intelligence, APDR 2025)

In contrast, Pakistan's defense budget for the fiscal year 2024–2025 was USD 7.6 billion (see Table 1), representing a nearly 15% increase from the previous year. However, this accounts for only 1.7% of its GDP, down from the previous allocation of 2% (Zubair and Tarar 2025).

Table 1: Pakistan's Defense Budget (USD) (Source: Sareen 2025)

Year	Defence Budget (PKR million)	Exchange Rate (PKR: US$)	Defence Budget (US$ million)
2016-17	860,169	104	8215.56
2017-18	920,166	109	8377.33
2018-19	1,100,334	136	8085.34
2019-20	1,152,535	158	7293.14
2020-21	1,289,134	160	8056.08
2021-22	1,370,000	177	7720.48
2022-23	1,563,000	248	6301.40
2023-24	1,804,000	282	6376.81
2024-25	2,122,000	279	7603.55
2025-26	2,550,000	282	9042.55

Using data from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Statista has illustrated each country's annual military expenditures since 1980. India's military budget is significantly larger than Pakistan's (see Figure 2), directly reflecting its greater military potential.

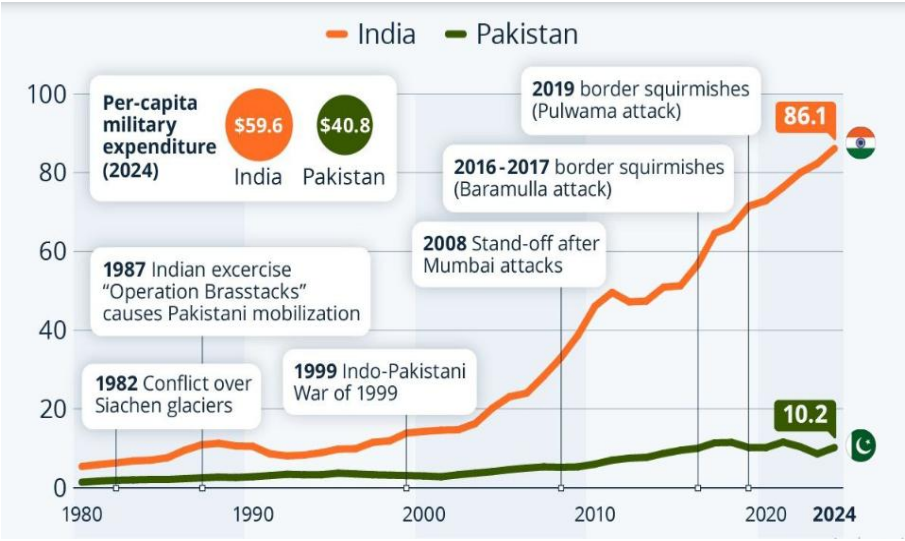

Figure 2: Total Military Expenditure of India and Pakistan (Billion US Dollars) (Source: Rao 2025)

India has one of the largest armies in the world, with 1.45 million active personnel and over one million in reserve (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2025a). The Indian Armed Forces comprise three branches: the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force. The Indian Army is capable of conducting conventional warfare as well as counterinsurgency and guerrilla operations. Its armored units primarily consist of Russian T-90 tanks and the domestically developed Arjun tanks. Additionally, it maintains a mechanized infantry force capable of rapid deployment and equipped with advanced artillery systems (Zubair and Tarar 2025).

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An important element of India's strategic deterrence is its Air Force, which operates a fleet of over 700 aircraft. These include the Sukhoi Su-30MKI, Mirage 2000, Jaguar IS/IN, Tejas, and the French Rafale, all of which are multi-role fighters that significantly enhance India's air capabilities (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025b). The Indian Navy has expanded its operational reach to become a blue-water navy with substantial littoral capabilities, including the aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya, multi-role combat ships, and nuclear submarines, strengthening India's position in the Indian Ocean region (Levesques, Bowen, and Gill 2021a).

In contrast, Pakistan's military, while smaller with approximately 654,000 active personnel, has earned a reputation for professionalism and strategic agility. The Pakistan Army emphasizes rapid mobilization and incorporates specialized infantry and mechanized units capable of both conventional and asymmetric warfare (Siddiqa 2017a). The Al-Khalid tank, developed in collaboration with China, along with older models such as the Type 85, forms the backbone of Pakistan's armored forces. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) operates around 400 combat aircraft, including American F-16A/Bs, Mirage III/V, and the domestically produced JF-17 Thunder, co-developed with China. This combination of national and international aircraft provides the PAF with notable flexibility, despite its relatively modest size (Siddiqa 2017b).

During the crisis, India's Russian-built S-400 air and missile defense system gained significant attention. Its exact role in the conflict remains unclear. Since the crisis ended, Indian journalists, some reportedly close to the Modi government, have offered differing accounts of the S-400's involvement. According to some reports, it was deployed more than ten times and successfully engaged at least one Pakistani aircraft, while others described only minor engagement. Debris found in both Pakistan and India appears consistent with S-400 interceptors, suggesting at least some operational use, including attempted intercepts in Pakistani airspace (Clary 2025b). Overall, the S-400 did not play a decisive role in military operations, as its effectiveness depends on Pakistan's military capabilities and the number of detection systems available to India.

Nevertheless, India maintains a strategic advantage by possessing the S-400. The Pakistan Navy, while smaller than India's, focuses heavily on coastal defense and deterrence through its diesel-electric submarines. These submarines are reportedly equipped with anti-ship missiles, making them a serious threat beneath the surface in the Arabian Sea and beyond (Small 2015a). This naval posture reflects Pakistan's need to counter India's growing maritime capabilities while safeguarding its own maritime interests.

Nuclear weapons are a central component of India and Pakistan's military strategies, serving primarily as instruments of deterrence. At the start of 2025, nine states, the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel, collectively possessed approximately 12,241 nuclear weapons, of which 9,614 were considered potentially operational. An estimated 3,912 of these warheads were deployed with operational forces, including roughly 2,100 kept at high operational alert on ballistic missiles (SIPRI, 2025a).

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the global nuclear weapons inventory as of January 2025 is distributed as follows: USA – 5,177; Russia – 5,459; UK – 225; France – 290; China – 600; India – 180; Pakistan – 170; North Korea – 50; Israel – 90 (SIPRI, 2025b). India possesses 180 nuclear warheads, supported primarily by ballistic missiles, especially the Agni series. India's nuclear doctrine is based on a "no first use" policy,

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emphasizing credible minimum deterrence and a secure second-strike capability, which relies on both nuclear submarines and land-based delivery systems (Kristensen et al. 2025a).

Pakistan's approach to nuclear policy differs significantly from that of other nuclear-armed states. The country possesses approximately 170 warheads and maintains strategic ambiguity, rejecting a "no first use" doctrine. It relies on tactical nuclear weapons designed to counter India's conventional superiority, particularly in the context of a potential conflict in Kashmir (Ganguly and Kapur 2010b). This strategy has raised concerns about command and control, escalation management, and regional stability, as the risk of unintended or rapid escalation remains high.

The nuclear policies of India and Pakistan have evolved in response to each other. Following nuclear tests in 1998, India declared its "credible minimum deterrence" doctrine, based on a policy of retaliation only. Pakistan began developing nuclear weapons in 1972 after India's nuclear program, particularly following India's decisive victory in the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War and the independence of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). India's 1974 Smiling Buddha test further accelerated Pakistan's program. By the 1980s, Pakistan's technology was considered advanced enough to produce a nuclear bomb. Pakistan conducted its own nuclear tests following India's 1998 tests, marking both nations' public nuclearization while the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) system was being strengthened globally (Izuyama and Ogawa 2003).

Following two rounds of nuclear testing, India formally declared itself a nuclear-armed state in 1998. Pakistan responded with its own tests and declared a month later, raising concerns about a potential arms race. Despite not being a signatory to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) or the NPT, Pakistan has sought to portray itself as a "responsible" nuclear power, stating that it will sign these treaties only after India does. Pakistan is currently blocking the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT), which aims to prevent the continued production of fissile material for nuclear weapons (CND UK 2025b).

Defense procurement trends further highlight the differences in military modernization strategies. India has pursued a hybrid approach, combining significant imports, primarily from Russia, France, Israel, and the United States, with ambitious domestic development programs (Levesques, Bowen, and Gill 2021b).

Pakistan's defense procurement relies heavily on foreign suppliers, particularly China, which provides combat aircraft, missile systems, and naval vessels. Chinese assistance has been crucial in maintaining and enhancing Pakistan's defense capabilities, including the development and deployment of JF-17 fighter jets and the construction of naval vessels under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Small 2015b). This dependence has significantly shaped Pakistan's relationship with China, strengthening both its military capabilities and broader geopolitical ties.

India holds a clear advantage over Pakistan in conventional military capabilities, both in terms of quantity and quality. However, Pakistan has emphasized asymmetric warfare, rapid mobilization, and nuclear deterrence to counterbalance the conventional disparity. Both countries maintain substantial military infrastructure, yet their strategies and procurement priorities reflect different threat perceptions and objectives. The uncertainty and mutual fear generated by these growing capabilities continue to complicate bilateral relations and influence the behavior and policies of both states (Mearsheimer 2014).

Accordingly, a comparative analysis shows that India and Pakistan differ significantly in terms of territorial size, resource endowment, demographics, social and economic development,

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and military and economic power. Against this backdrop, the likelihood increases that, if Pakistan finds itself in a deadlock or strategic dilemma, it could, in line with its declared nuclear policy, consider the use of nuclear weapons. Both India and Pakistan are actively modernizing their nuclear arsenals and seeking to strengthen their nuclear capabilities.

The ongoing military rivalry between India and Pakistan has significant implications for South Asian security, especially given the regional geopolitical dynamics and the nuclear factor. The continuous modernization and expansion of armed forces by both countries make security in a nuclear environment increasingly precarious (Upadhyay 2019). To prevent this rivalry from escalating into open conflict, far more effective diplomacy, confidence-building measures, and escalation-reduction strategies are essential.

SWOT ANALYSIS OF INDIA-PAKISTAN NUCLEAR SECURITY

The nuclear capabilities of India and Pakistan constitute a pivotal element of their respective national security architectures, exerting a profound influence on the stability of the South Asian region. To more precisely delineate the role and significance of nuclear weapons within the bilateral relations and enduring confrontation between these two states, marked by a protracted strategic rivalry, it is essential to evaluate their nuclear security and its implications for both regional and global stability through a SWOT analysis.

Strengths – India and Pakistan maintain robust nuclear command and control systems designed to ensure the security and reliability of their arsenals. India's nuclear doctrine asserts a no-first-use policy, which contributes to strategic stability by emphasizing deterrence and a defensive posture (Kristensen et al. 2025b). India has placed particular emphasis on secure second-strike capabilities, including nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles deployed on submarines, which reinforce its deterrence policy and readiness to retaliate in the event of a first strike. Pakistan's nuclear policy, by contrast, maintains deliberate ambiguity and includes mechanisms to protect its arsenal from unauthorized use or theft (Ganguly and Kapur 2010c). Both countries actively participate in international nuclear security initiatives and global non-proliferation forums, which is important for building trust within the community of nuclear-armed states.

Weaknesses – Despite these strengths, both countries' nuclear security frameworks exhibit particular vulnerabilities. Pakistan's doctrine, which does not rule out first use, heightens India's threat perception and increases the risk of military miscalculation, particularly during asymmetric or low-intensity conventional conflicts. The deployment of tactical nuclear weapons by Pakistan is a particular concern, as their short range and varied delivery systems allow for front-line deployment, raising the risk of accidental or unauthorized use. Meanwhile, India's diverse nuclear arsenal, though well protected, requires technological modernization, and bureaucratic coordination challenges can delay decision-making during crises. Both sides also face weaknesses in protecting critical infrastructure, which heightens the risk of escalation. Damage to or the destruction of key infrastructure could create security dilemmas or impasses that might push either side toward nuclear escalation, posing a significant challenge to regional, international, and global security.

Opportunities – India and Pakistan have significant potential to enhance nuclear security cooperation and reduce risks through confidence-building dialogue. Communication hotlines could serve as vital channels to prevent nuclear crises. Additionally, accession to and expansion

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of global arms control agreements could provide further avenues for stability. Greater transparency regarding nuclear doctrines and stockpiles may help alleviate tensions and reduce the likelihood of confrontation (Perkovich 2001). Both countries could also pursue joint initiatives to improve the security of nuclear materials and prevent their proliferation. The adoption of an "Open Skies" treaty framework could substantially help restore and consolidate confidence. Regional and global actors can support diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions and promote strategic stability (Narang 2014), which is crucial for strengthening security at national, regional, and global levels.

Threats – Nuclear security in South Asia faces persistent and multifaceted threats. The unresolved Kashmir dispute remains a significant flashpoint that could escalate into a nuclear confrontation. Tensions over water resources further exacerbate regional instability. The presence of non-state militant actors on Pakistani territory increases the risk of sabotage or theft of nuclear materials (Sagan 2011). Rapid technological developments have also amplified cyber threats, posing new risks to the command and control systems of nuclear weapons on both sides. Cyberattacks could disrupt decision-making processes or manipulate critical systems (SIPRI 2019). Moreover, the absence of a formalized arms control agreement between India and Pakistan heightens the risk of nuclear escalation during crises. Information warfare further complicates security, as it is resource-intensive and difficult to manage effectively in the context of new technologies. Collectively, these challenges underscore the fragile nuclear security environment in South Asia and highlight the serious threats to regional and global stability.

Achieving peace and stability between India and Pakistan is critical to regional and international security. If the conflict were to escalate into a large-scale war, the potential use of nuclear weapons would have catastrophic consequences. Officials from both countries have emphasized that they are prepared to use nuclear weapons if necessary, which could result in millions of deaths and widespread radiation-related illness. Such an outcome would threaten not only the populations of India and Pakistan but also neighboring regions and the broader international community. The direction and extent of radiation spread from a nuclear explosion are highly unpredictable, making the consequences even more uncertain. The timing and circumstances of potential nuclear use remain unknown, further heightening the risks.

In conclusion, although India and Pakistan have made significant progress in securing their nuclear arsenals, serious risks remain. Doctrinal ambiguities and the decision-making processes of political authorities mean that responses in a crisis may not always be entirely predictable, posing challenges to both regional and global security. The relationship between the two countries remains fragile, compounded by the current geopolitical situation and emerging threats associated with modern technologies. It is therefore imperative to prioritize confidence-building measures, strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation, enhance transparency, and address both traditional and non-traditional security challenges. These steps are essential to reinforce nuclear security and ensure regional stability in South Asia. Without such measures, the risks associated with nuclear security could extend beyond the region, posing broader threats to international peace and security.

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CONCLUSION

The resolution of the Kashmir conflict requires a nuanced, complex strategy that addresses the interests of the parties involved through long-term negotiations. It is impossible to fully satisfy all parties, given the intersection and competition of their interests. Accordingly, aside from negotiations, a logical resolution could theoretically involve the victory of one party; however, the nuclear arsenals and military capabilities of India and Pakistan make such an outcome highly unlikely. Overall, the Kashmir region remains one of the most densely militarized areas in the world, characterized by the presence of terrorist organizations, national armies, rebel groups, protest movements, and oppressed populations. The Kashmir issue is widely recognized as one of the most difficult conflict-resolution challenges in modern history, and the recent escalation has introduced new threats to global security, including the potential use of nuclear weapons.

The theoretical frameworks employed in this study facilitated an analytical justification that allowed us to answer the research questions and assess the role of nuclear weapons in the India-Pakistan conflict. The analysis confirms that nuclear weapons continue to act as a deterrent to large-scale wars in the post-Cold War period. Amid a new Cold War environment, global and regional power rivalries are intensifying, increasing the threats to international stability. Given the ongoing conflicts and wars worldwide, the involvement of global actors is crucial in preventing a large-scale war between nuclear-armed states. Any nuclear conflict, whether involving a small or large arsenal, would have irreversible consequences with devastating implications for humanity and the planet.

Nuclear weapons play a central role in India-Pakistan relations, complicating the security environment while simultaneously contributing to a form of strategic stability. However, the longevity of this balance remains uncertain, as India's declared "no first use" policy contrasts with Pakistan's strategic ambiguity and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, which heightens the risk of escalation and miscalculation. Uncertainty surrounding military doctrines, combined with emerging cyber threats, further exacerbates these dangers, underscoring the critical need for restored confidence and open communication to prevent inadvertent escalation that could lead to full-scale nuclear conflict.

Disputes over water resources further complicate India-Pakistan relations. The Indus Waters Treaty has historically served as a rare example of successful bilateral cooperation, yet political tensions, particularly over Kashmir, have diminished its effectiveness. Climate change is contributing to growing water scarcity, making cooperative water management increasingly urgent. This issue has the potential to spark future military conflict, particularly given nationalist policies on both sides, which hinder constructive dialogue and limit prospects for joint resource management. Nonetheless, water resource management also presents an opportunity for diplomatic engagement, trust-building, and conflict risk reduction, provided that regional and global actors actively promote cooperation and adherence to international norms.

In summary, the India-Pakistan conflict encompasses several critical issues that drive confrontation, given the high level of interdependence between the two states. These include territorial disputes, military rivalry, the nuclear arms race, asymmetric threats, and challenges in resource management. Among these, nuclear security emerges as the most pressing issue, as it plays a central role in deterring large-scale war.

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Using comparative and SWOT analyses, this study highlights the importance of the balance of power and nuclear deterrence policies in India-Pakistan relations, which serve to restrain both sides from engaging in extensive conventional warfare. The complexity of regional security is further amplified by the interests of other regional actors committed to preventing nuclear escalation. Any use of nuclear weapons would have devastating consequences, including the spread of nuclear radiation across an expanded geographical area, depending on the scale of the nuclear detonation, posing significant challenges to global security.

Accordingly, regional and global actors, as well as international organizations, play a crucial role in managing the India-Pakistan conflict and promoting stability. Their active engagement is essential to prevent potential threats, mitigate risks, and maintain both regional and international security.

This study relies mainly on publicly available sources, which may not capture sensitive information about nuclear capabilities or strategic decision-making. It focuses on a broad regional perspective, limiting analysis of localized dynamics and specific incidents. Additionally, qualitative methods, such as comparative and SWOT analyses, provide insights but cannot yield precise predictions about nuclear escalation. Finally, rapid geopolitical and technological changes mean that some conclusions may require ongoing revision.

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CONTRIBUTOR

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Implementing Children's Rights in the Western Balkans: Institutional Challenges and International Compliance

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Abstract
Children's rights, including access to education and healthcare, protection from abuse, and participation in decisions affecting their lives, are fundamental human rights established by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) have ratified the UNCRC and aligned their national legislation with international and regional standards. However, practical implementation remains uneven due to institutional weaknesses, limited resources, socio-cultural barriers, and fragmented governance. This study uses a mixed-methods comparative approach, combining quantitative data from UNICEF and the KidsRights Index with qualitative analysis of legislation, policies, and institutional mechanisms. Findings show Serbia and Montenegro perform best, North Macedonia demonstrates progress in education but limited child participation, while Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo face significant gaps.

Keywords
Children's Rights; Western Balkans; UNCRC; Comparative Analysis; Education; Institutional Effectiveness, International Compliance

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental aspect of human rights is the rights of children. These rights guarantee protection, access to education and healthcare, and the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their lives. The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) created a universal framework for the protection and well-being of children worldwide, encompassing civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Children's rights have consistently been the focus of numerous scientific studies at both national and international levels (Lundy et al. 2021; Lansdown 2018).

Western Balkan countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, have ratified the UNCRC and implemented international and regional standards. These countries have adopted relevant international and regional frameworks, such as Council of Europe conventions and EU child protection policies. However, many challenges remain in translating these commitments into practice (Council of Europe 2021; European Commission 2022). Key obstacles include institutional weaknesses, limited financial and human resources, and socio-cultural barriers, including political instability and fragmented governance, which hinder consistent implementation of children's rights (UNDP 2021).

Evidence from the national reports on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and UNICEF assessments highlights significant challenges in children's access to health and

education, as well as inequalities in Albania and Kosovo, where gaps exceed regional averages. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro face institutional and structural limitations that constrain child protection, emphasizing the need for studies that systematically compare countries, identify key barriers, and provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and practitioners (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2022; UNICEF 2023).

Across the Western Balkans, legislative frameworks protecting children's rights generally comply with international standards. Nevertheless, implementation remains uneven, with persistent issues not addressed by legal provisions alone, such as insufficient involvement of social services and inadequate protection against violence and exploitation. UNICEF reports and reports of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child document ongoing efforts to prevent abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Socio-cultural norms and traditional practices, which vary across countries, often hinder children's participation in decision-making processes.

This paper aims to identify the difficulties and gaps in the implementation of children's rights in the Western Balkans by examining the legal and institutional frameworks for child protection in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Access to education and healthcare, protection mechanisms, and monitoring institutions are key indicators for assessing practical implementation and serve as critical balancing factors. A specific objective of this study is to identify similarities, differences, and challenges that hinder effective implementation, and to use the findings to propose policy recommendations and best practices to strengthen institutional capacity, promote interagency cooperation, and enhance children's participation in decision-making.

The significance of this paper lies in its contribution to regional comparative literature by providing a detailed analysis of the implementation of children's rights in the Western Balkans. The study integrates quantitative data from UNICEF and the KidsRights Index with qualitative assessments of national legislation and policies. It offers a nuanced understanding of the structural, institutional, and socio-cultural factors that affect children's rights (UNICEF 2022; KidsRights Foundation 2022). Practically, this study identifies implementation obstacles and successful strategies for policy design, aiming to improve the effectiveness and coherence of child protection systems across the region. Highlighting gaps in legal and policy frameworks underscores the need for more substantial, more coordinated efforts to protect children's rights, ultimately contributing to improved well-being and equitable access to justice, education, and healthcare (Lundy et al. 2021; UNDP 2021).

CONCEPTS AND CONTEXTS

Children's Rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

One of the fundamental requirements for the proper functioning of a country is the protection of children's rights. With the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) by the UN General Assembly in 1989, all states, including Albania, ratified it, committing to ensure children's survival, development, protection, and participation (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2013). Based on principles of non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, and the child's right to participate in decisions that affect them, the

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UNCRC represents the highest level of institutional, political, social, and legal attention to children (UNICEF 2022a).

Theoretically, children's rights include the right to education, protection from violence and abuse, participation in public life, and inclusion in decision-making processes. Children also have the right to be integrated into their communities and to influence decisions affecting them, which requires a shift in institutional mindsets toward a just and equitable society (UNICEF 2019). Efforts are ongoing to harmonize national legal frameworks with international standards and to establish institutions and mechanisms for child protection. However, challenges remain, particularly economic and cultural issues, such as the prevalence of violence and abuse against children and the lack of effective support for unemployed caregivers (Stojanović 2022).

Additionally, there is potential to increase children's inclusion in judicial and administrative processes, which depends on institutional capacity and professional training (Council of Europe 2019; Milošević 2021). Addressing these challenges effectively requires adopting new reforms and updated policies to improve children's rights practices across the Western Balkans (World Bank 2022a).

The Regional and International Legal Context

The guarantee of children's rights also serves as an institutional safeguard for signatory states, requiring them to adopt legal and institutional measures to protect children. The UNCRC is the most important international framework in this regard, alongside additional protocols addressing more complex issues such as armed conflict, child separation and trafficking, and individual complaints (UNICEF 2022a). Clear and detailed strategies for ensuring children's rights have been implemented. For example, the Council of Europe's Action Plan 2022–2027 provides member states with specific guidelines on legal protection, access to services, and the creation of safe conditions for children (Council of Europe 2022).

The EU has consistently emphasized children's rights, making legal reforms aligned with international standards a key requirement for accession. This highlights the importance of guiding Western Balkan countries toward compliance. However, achieving these reforms and harmonizing national laws with international standards is not without challenges. Issues include insufficient independent oversight in some countries, limited reporting mechanisms, and structural gaps that hinder the practical enforcement of children's rights.

To address these challenges effectively, several factors require immediate institutional attention: properly functioning authorities, adequate funding, professional training, and meaningful participation of children in decision-making processes. Strengthening these areas is essential for maximizing alignment between national provisions and international standards.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most important topics in international discussions on children's rights is their protection, access to education and healthcare, and inclusion in decision-making processes. Organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have examined these issues in detail. A primary goal of these organizations is to establish a clear understanding of the current state of

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child protection practices in the Western Balkans and to identify the difficulties and challenges in implementing children's rights.

UNICEF (2019) reported that legal frameworks for the protection of children have been adopted across the Western Balkans, particularly in education and healthcare systems. However, the reports highlight that the most significant challenges lie in the inclusion of children with special needs, emphasizing the urgent need for institutional attention and coordination. These reports also use quantitative indicators, such as registration records, literacy rates, and patient coverage, as reference points for analyzing practices in each country.

Save the Children (2020) emphasized the importance of coordinated strategies among countries to effectively uphold children's rights. Their analysis showed that child protection often relies more on NGO-led initiatives than on state institutions, highlighting a significant institutional capacity gap. This underscores the need to focus on institutional frameworks and interorganizational cooperation, not only to assess the theoretical implementation of laws but also to understand the practical challenges of enforcement. State-led mechanisms must complement NGO efforts, particularly in Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA 2018) compared institutional differences across countries, focusing on the presence of an independent ombudsman and specialized child protection bodies. The report concluded that a lack of timely, detailed data reporting significantly undermines accountability and monitoring, highlighting a key barrier to the effective implementation of children's rights.

A highly significant analysis using the KidsRights Index, conducted by the KidsRights Foundation in 2023, provided a comparative assessment of Balkan countries. The study concluded that countries with independent monitoring structures, such as Serbia and Montenegro, tend to perform better in protecting children's rights than Albania, which ranks lower due to gaps in implementation and monitoring. One of the most critical shortcomings in Albania is the limited scope of research on this topic. Existing studies have primarily focused on structural and practical obstacles to the fulfillment of children's rights, addressing urgent issues such as children's participation in education and healthcare, as well as their inclusion in social services.

There is a clear need for further research using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Combining quantitative indicators with qualitative assessments of institutional performance provides a comprehensive understanding of both policies and practice. The existing literature consistently highlights the prevalence of violence and abuse against children and the limited access to justice in such cases (Stojanović 2022). Institutional reports have also emphasized that institutional resistance and insufficient professional training hinder children's effective participation in judicial and administrative processes. Future studies should therefore focus on capacity building, interagency coordination, and evaluation of mechanisms designed to protect children from abuse and neglect (Council of Europe 2019; Milošević 2021).

The regional and international legal context plays a central role in guiding children's rights in the Western Balkans, particularly the UNCRC, which serves as the primary framework for all countries in the region (UNICEF 2022a). Complex issues such as armed conflict, child exploitation and trafficking, and individual complaint mechanisms are addressed through additional protocols. The Council of Europe Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2022–2027) provides further guidance on legal protection, access to justice, participation, and safe living

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conditions. The EU has also played a key role through its enlargement policy, encouraging candidate countries, including Albania, to harmonize national legislation with international standards on children's rights (Council of Europe 2022).

The study by Lirëza and Kume (2023) provides a detailed analysis of the principle of the best interests of the child in both legal and institutional contexts in Albania. The study demonstrates that, although Albania has made ongoing efforts to align its legislation with international standards, there remains a pressing need for continuous improvement in the practical implementation of this principle, which remains inconsistent across institutions. Administrative and judicial procedures have been identified as key areas requiring attention. Enhancing professional training and strengthening institutional capacity are highlighted as critical measures to ensure the full realization of the best interests of the child (Lirëza and Kume 2023).

These findings reinforce broader regional literature, emphasizing that legal harmonization alone is insufficient. Adequate protection of children's rights requires simultaneous investments in monitoring mechanisms, professional development, and institutional structures that guarantee meaningful inclusion of children's voices in all decision-making processes.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The comparative design of this study employs two complementary methods: qualitative and quantitative. Both approaches are used to assess the implementation of children's rights in six Western Balkan countries, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, allowing the identification of similarities, differences, and patterns in both legal and practical implementation across the region. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, this study examines the legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and measurable indicators that provide a comprehensive assessment of how international conventions are implemented in practice. Additionally, it highlights specific institutional actions that can help address challenges faced by children in key systems such as education, healthcare, and participation.

Samples and Data Sources

Reliable official secondary sources form a fundamental basis for this study. These internationally recognized sources include reports and concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2022), UNICEF country profile studies and monitoring reports (UNICEF 2019; UNICEF 2022a), Save the Children regional studies on children's rights (Save the Children 2020), and the KidsRights Index (KidsRights Foundation 2023). Statistical data were drawn from INSTAT, Eurostat, and regional statistical offices, as well as national legislation and institutional documents, including relevant laws, regulations, strategies, and policy papers.

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A study needs to focus on a specific time period to ensure comparability and relevance. For this research, the period 2018–2023 was selected to provide up-to-date, comparable data across all countries included in the analysis.

Methods

Data availability for Kosovo remains limited due to its non-membership in the United Nations and the absence of mandatory reporting obligations to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Consequently, this study relies on secondary assessments, civil society reports, and international organization evaluations to provide indicative rather than definitive findings for Kosovo.

Instruments and Measures

The indicators used in this study to assess the implementation of children's rights include school enrollment rates, literacy levels, inclusion of children with special needs, access to healthcare services, vaccination coverage, infant mortality rates, the number and quality of child protection institutions, the presence of independent monitoring mechanisms, reported cases of abuse, legal protection measures, and children's participation in administrative, judicial, and community decision-making processes.

For proper analysis, cross-country comparisons were conducted using these quantitative indicators. In the qualitative approach, the study examined institutional capacities, legal frameworks, and policy implementation to evaluate how effectively countries fulfill and enforce their legal obligations regarding children's rights.

Procedure

To achieve timely and accurate identification of relevant legal and institutional measures, several sources were systematically reviewed, including national legislation, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child reports, and UNICEF and Save the Children studies. These reports and institutional documents provided the basis for extracting quantitative indicator data and constructing comparative tables.

To identify practical challenges and best practices, a qualitative assessment was conducted using institutional reports, ombudsman documents, and monitoring studies. Drawing on multiple official, national, and international sources enabled a comprehensive analysis of both legal frameworks and their practical implementation. This approach minimized bias and enhanced the reliability of the findings.

Data Analysis and Purpose of the Study

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative component uses comparative tables on education, healthcare, and participation to rank the included countries and examine differences in the implementation of children's rights, highlighting gaps in practical application. The qualitative analysis explores

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institutional patterns, barriers, and challenges, providing case examples that illustrate both obstacles and best practices, particularly in children's participation in judicial and administrative processes. By integrating both approaches, the study identifies key political, economic, and social factors influencing the effective implementation of children's rights in the region. The primary aim is to compare the implementation of children's rights across Albania and five other Western Balkan countries, focusing on measurable indicators, institutional effectiveness, and contextual factors shaping outcomes.

RESULTS

Official reports indicate that Western Balkan countries have made efforts to align their national legislation with international standards. However, numerous challenges remain in practical implementation. In Albania, these challenges include insufficient funding and limited professional training for personnel (UNICEF 2023). In Serbia and North Macedonia, unresolved issues are primarily related to ineffective monitoring of cases of violence against children. Meanwhile, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo face gaps in legislation that are not fully aligned with international standards, as well as inadequate financial and technical support for children (World Bank 2022).

Access to Primary Education

Access to primary education, as guaranteed by Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, forms the foundation for all other rights, including social development, equality, and protection from abuse. Comparative analysis across the Western Balkans highlights areas where access to education still needs improvement.

Table 1: Access to Primary Education in the Western Balkans (Source: Author's depiction based on data from UNICEF 2022a, Save the Children 2020, and Eurostat 2023)

Country	Access to Primary Education (%)
Serbia	98
Montenegro	97
North Macedonia	96
Albania	95.3
Bosnia-Herzegovina	94
Kosovo (evaluation)	c. 92

Note: The figure for Kosovo is an estimate based on available reports and evaluations, as comprehensive official data are unavailable.

Table 1 shows that children in Serbia and Montenegro have the highest levels of access to primary education, reflecting the relative effectiveness of their national education policies. Notably, one of Serbia's key policies is the provision of transportation for children and young people living in rural areas, who would otherwise face difficulties traveling to school.

Primary education in North Macedonia is also highly inclusive, supported by targeted programs for teacher training and diversity. Albania's performance is slightly lower, though still

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relatively high by regional standards. However, challenges persist, particularly in rural areas where poor transportation and economic constraints limit access to schools. Addressing these issues represents a crucial strategic focus for improving educational access.

Bosnia and Herzegovina shows lower levels of achievement, likely due to its fragmented education system, which is structured along ethnic lines and contributes to discrimination and temporary school dropouts. Data for Kosovo are incomplete, as reporting remains inconsistent, but available information highlights deficits in livelihoods, insufficiently trained staff, and high school dropout rates among Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. Overall, there are significant variations in educational outcomes across the region.

Access to Health Services

Article 24 of the UN Convention guarantees every child the right to access high-quality healthcare. Comparative analysis reveals significant disparities in healthcare provision across the Western Balkans (Figure 1).

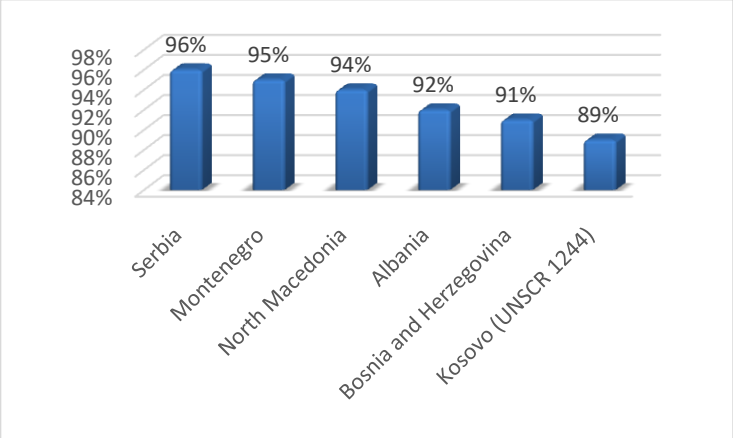

Figure 1: Access to Health Services (%)
(Source: Author's depiction based on UNICEF 2022a, WHO Serbia 2021, and World Bank 2022)

The results from Figure 1 indicate that Serbia and Montenegro lead the region, supported by strong health systems and comprehensive public health policies for children. Key measures in these countries include regulated vaccination schedules, regular check-ups, and outreach programs targeting rural areas. Serbia has also significantly expanded local medical centers providing free pediatric care.

North Macedonia reports broad access to healthcare in urban areas (95%) but faces challenges in rural coverage and a shortage of pediatric specialists (World Health Organization [WHO], Serbia 2021). Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo experience regional inequalities, limited medical personnel, especially in less developed areas, and shortages of primary care services and essential medicines for children. Albania generally provides satisfactory access to healthcare; however, challenges remain, including a shortage of pediatric specialists in rural areas, inadequate transportation for children with disabilities, and insufficient resources in mental health.

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Institutional Mechanisms for Child Protection

Article 4 of the UN Convention requires states to establish effective and independent institutions for the implementation and monitoring of children's rights. While this indicator cannot be measured numerically, it reflects a state's capacity to provide both legal and practical protection for children (Table 2).

Table 2: Institutional Mechanisms for Child Protection (Author's depiction based on data from UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2022, UNICEF 2022a, and Save the Children 2020)

Country	Institutional Mechanism
Serbia	Yes – Ombudsman for Children's Rights
Montenegro	Yes – Special Office under the Ombudsman
Albania	Yes – Commissioner for Children's Rights
North Macedonia	Yes – Section under the People's Advocate
Bosnia and Herzegovina	No – Internal, not independent
Kosovo	No – There is no independent institution for children's rights

Note: Kosovo currently lacks an independent institution for child protection; this information is based on available reports and evaluations.

Serbia and Montenegro have established independent bodies with clearly defined mandates. In Serbia, the ombudsman handles complaints, investigates cases of abuse and sexual violence, and provides recommendations supported by legislation. Montenegro has a dedicated bureau within the ombudsman's office that follows up on violations of children's rights, participates in policy development, and reports regularly to the Assembly.

Albania has a commissioner responsible for children's rights; however, the position is not specialized and lacks the independence seen in Serbia or Montenegro. North Macedonia has limited capacity in this area, with constraints in funding and decision-making, resulting in only partial independence. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo currently lack independent, dedicated child protection institutions.

Table 3: Reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Author's depiction based on the Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2022), UNICEF 2022a, and OHCHR reports)

Country	Reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child
Serbia	Yes
Montenegro	Yes
Albania	Yes
North Macedonia	Yes
Bosnia and Herzegovina	No
Kosovo	No

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Additionally, Article 44 of the Convention requires states to submit initial and periodic reports on the measures they have taken to implement children's rights. These reports include progress assessments, identification of implementation gaps, and recommendations for improvement.

Western Balkan countries demonstrate varying levels of commitment and compliance with these reporting obligations (Table 3).

Albania has consistently fulfilled its reporting obligations, with the most recent report submitted in 2022. While this report was positively received, it lacks sufficient data on monitoring and children's participation. Serbia maintains an exemplary reporting record, collaborates with independent organizations, and implements recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Montenegro submits reports, although sometimes with delays, and faces challenges in inter-institutional coordination and data collection. North Macedonia's reporting was delayed due to political upheavals and the COVID-19 pandemic, with the last submission in 2020. Reporting is even more limited in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Kosovo's last report was submitted in 2012, and subsequent reports are missing due to political disputes. As Kosovo is not a UN member state, it is not formally required to submit reports; however, independent civil institutions have prepared equivalent assessments.

KidsRights Index

The KidsRights Index is a widely recognized tool for assessing the state of children's rights. It evaluates country performance across five areas: the right to survival, health, education, protection, and a supportive environment, including laws, policies, data collection, and children's participation. Scores range from 0 (lowest) to 1, providing a comparative measure of children's rights implementation (Table 4).

Table 4: KidsRights Index Scores (Source: KidsRights Foundation 2023)

Country	Score (Scale: 0–4)
Serbia	0.75
Montenegro	0.74
North Macedonia	0.72
Albania	0.68
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.65
Kosovo	N/A

Note: Kosovo is not included due to a lack of standardized reporting. Scores reflect overall performance in children's rights across health, education, protection, and participation.

The results in Table 4 indicate that Serbia leads the region, demonstrating the highest levels of access to health and education, as well as independent institutions that protect children's rights and promote their participation in local governance. Montenegro follows, ranking just behind Serbia, due to its well-developed functional structures and a relatively advanced legal framework compared to other countries in the region. North Macedonia ranks next, showing considerable progress in education in recent years; however, its performance is

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limited by low levels of child participation in decision-making, particularly for children in vulnerable situations, and by inadequate data collection.

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo rank significantly lower due to legislative gaps, insufficient budgets, and challenges in data collection. Institutional fragmentation and weak policy coordination further exacerbate these issues. Kosovo, in particular, is excluded from the ranking due to its current international status and the lack of standardized reporting.

DISCUSSION

In the field of human rights, the Western Balkan countries have adopted measures that vary across legal systems and have made progress in addressing specific difficulties, gaps, and challenges; however, significant challenges persist in practice. Among the key obstacles countries face in protecting children's rights are weak institutional capacity, fragmented coordination mechanisms, and insufficient or unstable financing. Prolonged distrust in public institutions has further undermined governance systems, including those related to education and child protection. For these reasons, it is essential to introduce new strategic reforms to legislative frameworks that place greater emphasis on practical implementation and measurable outcomes.

This study adopts a high-level mixed-methods comparative approach; however, the availability and completeness of reported data vary across the countries included in the analysis, particularly in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted with caution and understood as indicative of broader structural trends rather than precise longitudinal measurements. The results of this study should therefore be viewed as informative rather than conclusive.

Detailed, clear, and comprehensive country-specific analyses provide a framework that should be continuously strengthened through improved reporting practices. Such improvements would support future comparative studies aimed at assessing and monitoring the existence and effectiveness of independent bodies, particularly those dedicated to children's rights. In addition, incorporating concrete case studies is essential for deepening understanding of how rights are realized in practice. Monitoring and analyzing potential policy reforms across different national models can further inform the development of coherent national and regional strategies.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study relies exclusively on secondary data sources, which vary in scope, methodological rigor, and reporting frequency across countries. The absence of primary data collection and the lack of children's direct participation limit the ability to capture lived experiences and localized implementation dynamics. Nevertheless, triangulation across multiple international and national sources enhances the overall reliability of the comparative analysis.

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CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that children's rights are a critical concern in the Western Balkans. While significant progress has been made in aligning national legislation with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, translating legal commitments into everyday practice remains uneven. Implementation is influenced by factors such as institutional capacity, resource availability, and governance stability.

Serbia and Montenegro are the most advanced in the region, with independent child protection mechanisms and relatively strong education and healthcare systems, supported by political continuity, clear administrative mandates, and accountability. North Macedonia has made progress in inclusive education and teacher training, though rural-urban disparities and limited child participation persist. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo face greater structural and financial challenges, including unequal distribution of resources, complex administrative structures, and insufficient institutional support. Kosovo, in particular, is constrained by its partial international recognition and the absence of a fully independent child protection body.

Aligning national laws with international standards is only a first step. Effective implementation requires continuous monitoring, strong oversight institutions, long-term investment in professional training, child-centered social services, and reliable data systems. Integrating children's rights into policy planning and budgeting at all levels, along with regional cooperation and knowledge sharing, can help harmonize practices and address institutional gaps. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that every child in the region can fully enjoy their rights, without discrimination, regardless of location.

This study relies primarily on secondary data, which vary in quality, scope, and timeliness across countries. Incomplete or inconsistent data, particularly from Kosovo, may affect comparability. Additionally, the study does not include primary fieldwork or direct input from children, limiting insights into lived experiences and local contextual nuances in the implementation of children's rights.

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CONTRIBUTOR

The author contributed solely to the intellectual discourse that forms the foundation of this article, as well as its writing and editing, and assumes full responsibility for its content and interpretation.

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NATO and the Changing Space Security Environment: Strategic Challenges from China and Russia

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Abstract
Space has become a strategically critical domain for both state and non-state actors, including NATO and the European Union, due to its impact on sectors such as communication, navigation, intelligence, agriculture, transport, science, and banking. NATO's strategic concepts have evolved in response to this changing environment, culminating in the recognition of space as an operational domain and reflecting an evolutionary approach to emerging threats. This study analyzes NATO's growing focus on space, the development of its related policy frameworks, and the space programs of China and Russia, whose activities pose significant challenges to NATO's security posture. By examining these dynamics, the research highlights the strategic, operational, and policy implications of space competition for NATO in the 21st century.

Keywords
NATO; Space Security; Strategic Concepts; China; Russia; Policy Development; International Affairs

INTRODUCTION

The space race began with the launch of Sputnik-I, the USSR's first satellite, in 1957. In 1961, Yuri Gagarin was launched into space aboard the Vostok 3KA capsule, becoming the first human to orbit Earth. Initially led by the USA and the USSR, the space race later saw participation from other countries, including France and Canada. Today, while the USA and Russia remain leaders in space endeavors, they are followed by nations such as China, Japan, India, and members of the European Union. Additionally, private sector involvement in space activities is growing rapidly. These organizations can operate launch sites, manufacture launch vehicles and spacecraft, and provide related services.

One key indicator of interest in space activities today is the number of space agencies worldwide, along with the policy documents developed by states and international organizations. The primary responsibility of these agencies is to develop their countries' space ecosystems by preparing policy documents that outline goals, strategies, and future perspectives regarding space, an area of increasing importance, closely aligned with global developments. Currently, 77 countries have their own space agencies (Space Crew 2024). Beyond national initiatives, international organizations such as NATO and the European Union have also developed space-related policies in recent years, highlighting the crucial role of space in safeguarding collective security and promoting prosperity.

For NATO, the growing emphasis on space is closely linked to its broader strategic adaptation to technological change. NATO's evolving approach to Software-Defined Warfare,

Network-Centric Warfare, and Cognitive Warfare was emphasized in its Multilevel Governance Architecture (2016). These frameworks directly influence NATO's cyber and space policies, reflecting the broader integration of technology within the Alliance's strategic transformation. However, analyzing these aspects in detail is beyond the scope of this study, which focuses on NATO's space policy in general and compares it with the policies of Russia and China, rather than exploring space's interconnection with these emerging forms of warfare.

The aim of this study is therefore to analyze NATO's growing strategic focus on space and the development of related policy documents while also examining the space programs of China and Russia. Both countries seek to establish themselves as major space actors, and through their expanding activities and missions, they pose significant challenges to NATO's security framework in the 21st-century space domain. To this end, the study first analyzes the strategic significance of space within the new space ecosystem and changing global dynamics. It then examines NATO's evolving security context over the years, highlighting how space has gradually been integrated into its security agenda and policy development. The final chapter focuses on the space policies of China and Russia to fully understand the importance of space for NATO, as both countries pursue ambitious programs and activities that challenge the Alliance's security framework in the space domain.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative document analysis approach, which involves examining policy documents to gather data and understand the context in which they were created, why, and how. It focuses on policy documents related to the space strategies of NATO, China, and Russia to explore how each actor conceptualizes and frames its approach to outer space. The analysis is qualitative, emphasizing descriptive interpretation rather than numerical data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on NATO's increasing strategic focus on space, the development of related policy documents, and the space programs of China and Russia has been extensively examined in the academic literature. Scholars such as Wallander (2020) emphasize that, as a military alliance, NATO's strategic concepts have evolved in response to changes in the global security environment. This evolution is reflected in NATO's policy documents. For example, the Cyber Defense Pledge (NATO 2016) recognized cyber defense as a core task of NATO's collective defense, while the London Declaration (2019) formally acknowledged space as NATO's newest operational domain, alongside air, land, sea, and cyberspace. Additionally, NATO's Overarching Space Policy (2019), as the Alliance's primary policy document on space, outlines how various aspects of space utilization should be assessed in relation to allied security and NATO's deterrence capabilities. Together, these documents underscore NATO's adaptive approach to emerging security domains and its recognition of space as a critical component of Alliance operations.

In addition to NATO, recent literature on China's space sector primarily emphasizes its rapid growth and strategic ambitions over the past decade. Hilborne (2020), for instance, highlights China's space achievements, including lunar and robotic missions. Similarly, Na (2024)

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details China's mid- and long-term goals for space science missions, including the Space Exploration Plan. The European Space Policy Institute (ESPI) report (2024) also underscores the remarkable expansion of China's commercial space industry since 2014, noting its technological innovations and the development of new financial mechanisms.

Moreover, Julienne's article, "China's Ambitions in Space: The Sky's the Limit" (2021), identifies the main pillars of China's space policies, national development, military empowerment, and great power competition, tracing their origins to initial efforts in the 1950s. Building on these foundational pillars, recent literature emphasizes that President Xi Jinping's vision for outer space reflects broader aspirations for China to assert itself as a leading global power (Kashevarova and Panova 2023; Pollpeter et al. 2020). Overall, existing research portrays China's space program not only as a demonstration of technological capability but also as a deliberate instrument for asserting influence and shaping the future trajectory of international space activities.

In addition to NATO and China, scholars have extensively examined Russia's evolving role in global space activities, highlighting both its historical prominence and contemporary challenges. As Vidal (2021) notes, Russia's space legacy became a powerful symbol of national prestige and technological achievement during the Soviet era. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union marked a turning point, leading to the gradual weakening of Russia's space program due to challenges in adapting its industrial and institutional infrastructure (Radin et al. 2025).

Despite these challenges, some scholars, including Aliberti and Lisitsyna (2018), emphasize the role of President Vladimir Putin, noting that he prioritizes the development of Russia's national space activities, particularly its military-oriented programs, to strengthen the country's strategic space capabilities. Nevertheless, these domestic efforts have increasingly been constrained by external geopolitical developments.

Recent studies indicate that Russia's structural weaknesses have been exacerbated by geopolitical events, especially following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Pohl 2023). Dickey and Gleason (2024) highlight that Western sanctions led many commercial companies to withdraw their services from Russia, effectively isolating its space sector from global markets. Similarly, Luzin (2024) notes that international collaborative projects have been canceled or curtailed due to funding shortages and political restrictions. This trend is exemplified by Germany's termination of all bilateral space cooperation and by the European Space Agency's 2022 decision to suspend joint missions with Roscosmos (Pohl 2023). Collectively, the literature underscores a clear shift in Russia's position, from a leading actor in space exploration to a more constrained and isolated power, as ongoing geopolitical tensions continue to erode its longstanding partnerships and capabilities.

THE NEW SPACE ECOSYSTEM AND THE CHANGING GLOBAL DYNAMICS

The current century is marked by a renewed focus on space among nation-states, international organizations, and private companies. The growing importance of space has driven advancements in space technologies, which in turn have prompted transformations in global and regional political, economic, legal, and social dynamics. The rapid development of space technologies and their integral role in societal functioning (Bayır et al. 2021, 114) have made the

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operationalization of space in relation to individual well-being, sustainability, efficiency, and social welfare a central concern on state agendas, particularly within the frameworks of Society 5.0 and Industry 4.0. Today, the use of space applications in critical sectors such as agriculture, food supply, and security, as well as their diverse roles in military, tourism, and communications, encourages states to develop comprehensive strategies in this domain (Bohlmann and Petrovici 2019, 2).

This raises an important question: What developments have compelled states and non-state actors to prioritize space issues so intensively? Unlike in the past, space is no longer monopolized or controlled by any single state; it is regarded as a shared heritage of humanity. The benefits of space activities are increasingly understood as collective, underscoring the need to analyze opportunities for both competition and collaboration among various actors. The contemporary perspective on the phenomenon known as "new space" makes such analysis almost imperative, a process that unfolded quite differently in the 20th century.

During the Cold War, the two superpowers fiercely competed to demonstrate their supremacy on a global scale. Among the most notable arenas of this competition was the space race, in which each side sought to achieve increasingly advanced space flights and missions. This rivalry ultimately laid the foundation for many technologies and tools that are now part of daily life, shaping the political, economic, and social implications of space utilization. At that time, space activities were primarily under state control, which significantly limited the participation of other actors, such as companies and international organizations. According to the understanding of "old" or "traditional" space, the primary objectives of costly space activities were defined by state interests and national security considerations (Paikowsky 2017, 85–87). As a result, prior to the 1980s, the economic and social impact of space activities was relatively limited. The emergence of the first private space companies in the 1980s marked the beginning of space commercialization, ushering in a new global era of space utilization (Denis et al. 2020, 433).

New Space and Its Differences from Traditional Space

During the Cold War, traditional space was almost entirely dominated by states. Today, however, the concept of "new space" has emerged, in which states are increasingly transferring activities and authority to the private sector and commercial space companies. New space not only represents the operational domain of these new actors but has also prompted profound changes in the visions and objectives of traditional space actors. What was once under the exclusive control of nation-states has now become an arena for large corporations and international organizations as well (Denis et al. 2020, 432–433). This process has accelerated in the 21st century, creating a complex network of relationships among states, companies, international organizations, and individuals, in short, all new actors in international relations.

In the 20th century, although private initiatives such as satellite broadcasting and communication existed, the primary players remained developed states. As societal needs evolved and technology advanced, the space ecosystem underwent significant changes. A key term that captures these dynamics in the 21st century is new space. While there is no universally accepted definition, the term is widely recognized and helps clarify the current landscape of space politics, highlighting the distinction between "old" and "new" space (Golkar 2021, 2).

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Technological advancements, particularly in miniaturization, have significantly reduced the mass of electronics by up to 50%, thereby lowering the resources required for launches and enabling new participants to enter the space arena. Additionally, new space is characterized by the emergence of a diverse range of actors, including nations that previously had no space activities and private companies of varying sizes. These new entrants have the potential to disrupt existing supply chains through innovative business models. Space activities are increasingly seen as viable commercial ventures, with sectors such as space mining, tourism, and energy beginning to attract investment from private entrepreneurs and public-private partnerships (Golkar 2021, 4–5).

Key Factors in the Transformation of Traditional Space

Three fundamental factors have contributed to the transformation of traditional space. First is the evolution of space equipment and the expansion of technical knowledge. With the development of CubeSat technology, missions can now be conducted using satellites weighing less than one kilogram. Since the early 2000s, CubeSats have been developed at low cost by non-state actors, such as universities and private companies. They are used in space missions related to communication, education, and technological and scientific advancement (Swartwout 2013, 213–214).

The miniaturization of space equipment has reduced the costs of space technologies, increased accessibility, and enabled riskier missions than previously possible. Consequently, the knowledge base surrounding space technologies has grown exponentially. This trend has facilitated the emergence of new actors who either conduct space activities or provide equipment and services for these activities. Space has thus diversified, moving beyond the state-centric and security-focused discourse of the Cold War era, particularly since the 1990s. The participation of a variety of actors with differing objectives constitutes the second key factor transforming traditional space.

Finally, the inclusion of new actors has spurred the development of new markets, supply chains, business models, and investment opportunities. This economic transformation, often examined within the framework of the space economy, has fundamentally reshaped traditional space and created complex, interconnected relationships among actors. Recent public initiatives aimed at promoting space commercialization and business development highlight a global trend of increasing institutional emphasis on enhancing the private space economy and commercial ventures (ESPI 2022, 9).

In summary, the development of space technologies, the emergence of new actors, and the economic transformation of space have fundamentally altered its nature as an operational domain. These changes have given rise to the phenomenon referred to in the literature as new space. Today, we are entering a new era in global space utilization, where the evolution and management of these relationships represent both a domain of curiosity and a central focus of space diplomacy.

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NATO'S SPACE POLICY IN A CHANGING GLOBAL SECURITY LANDSCAPE

NATO's concept of threat has evolved over the years in response to changes in the global security environment. Established in 1949 as a collective defense alliance, NATO initially served as a strategic counterbalance to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, debates over NATO's relevance intensified in the absence of its primary adversary. During the Cold War, the threat was specific and singular: the Soviet Union. After its dissolution, the number and types of potential threats expanded within the evolving security landscape (Wallander 2020, 717). Under these conditions, NATO redefined its role by adopting new strategic concepts at the Rome Summit on November 7–8, 1991. The first post-1991 strategic concept emphasized collective security and defense, not against a predefined threat but in response to unpredictable risks, including political, economic, and social instability, nationalist and ethnic conflicts, terrorism, human rights violations, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Wallander 2020, 718–719).

In subsequent years, NATO began incorporating cyber defense into its political agenda. At the 2002 NATO Summit in Prague, cyber threats were recognized as increasingly destructive, coercive, and frequent in the twenty-first century. By the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, cyber defense had been recognized as a core task of NATO's collective defense, enabling the invocation of Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty in the event of a cyberattack (NATO 2024). Most importantly, at the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, cyberspace was officially recognized as a domain of operations for NATO, elevating it to the same level as the air, land, and maritime domains (NATO 2016). This recognition highlighted the central role of cyberspace in Alliance operations, notably as rapid technological advancements created both opportunities and threats within the domain. Among these advancements, the growing importance of artificial intelligence (AI), outlined in NATO's Multilevel Governance Architecture, emerged as a key development. This evolution ultimately led to the adoption of the NATO Artificial Intelligence Strategy in 2021, which identifies AI as a crucial enabler of cyber defense and a significant factor influencing the success of NATO operations (NATO 2024).

More recently, in 2019, space was recognized as NATO's newest operational domain, alongside air, land, sea, and cyberspace (NATO 2019). This step reflects NATO's commitment to enhancing its awareness and understanding of the space environment, particularly regarding its opportunities, challenges, and threats. Although the space race began during the Cold War, especially from the 1980s onward, the economic and social significance of space activities has grown considerably. In today's world, both state and non-state actors prioritize space-related activities, which are deeply interconnected with diverse sectors such as communication, navigation, intelligence, transport, agriculture, science, and banking (Baykal and Bayır 2024, 265).

In this context, the 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels marked the first time space was officially recognized as a critical domain for Allied security (NATO 2018), a development driven in part by the rising significance of emerging technologies such as AI. Artificial intelligence has become crucial for enhancing space situational awareness and decision-making, as the massive data flows from satellite and surveillance systems require AI tools for real-time analysis and threat detection. By integrating AI into its space governance and operational frameworks, NATO strengthens its capacity to monitor and protect critical space-based infrastructure, thereby

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enhancing the Alliance's resilience and strategic responsiveness in the space domain (NATO 2024).

Through the Brussels Declaration, NATO agreed to develop an Overarching Space Policy, which subsequently became the Alliance's primary policy document on space (NATO 2018). NATO's perspective on space has since been primarily defined by the 2019 Overarching Space Policy (NATO 2019), which comprehensively outlines how various aspects of space utilization should be assessed in relation to Allied security and NATO's deterrence capabilities. Over the years, the evolution of space utilization and rapid technological advancements have brought significant benefits to multiple sectors, including agriculture, environmental monitoring, transportation, science, communication, and banking. Additionally, the growing reliance of military and security operations on space is widely recognized as a critical consideration. For example, NATO depends on space-based systems to execute missions such as collective defense, crisis response, disaster relief, and counterterrorism, all of which rely on data and information obtained from or transmitted through space (NATO 2019).

In this context, NATO emphasizes several critical areas from a security and defense perspective, reaffirms its commitment to international law, and explicitly states that it has no intention of deploying weapons in space. The Alliance highlights the strategic importance of space, particularly regarding positioning, navigation and timing, early warning, environmental monitoring, secure satellite communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (NATO 2025). These advancements have led NATO Allies to recognize that space is increasingly a shared security concern, which must be integrated into the Alliance's deterrence and defense agenda.

NATO's first concrete step toward a space security policy was announced in December 2019 through the London Declaration, which officially defined space as an "operational domain" and publicly recognized it as such. The declaration stated: "We have declared space an operational domain for NATO, recognizing its importance in keeping us safe and tackling security challenges, while upholding international law" (NATO 2019). NATO continues to develop policies in response to the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of space. The adoption of the Overarching Space Policy and the recognition of space as an operational domain reflect the Alliance's evolutionary approach to adaptation, rather than a revolutionary shift.

Following the publication of NATO's Overarching Space Policy and the London Declaration in 2019, several additional key policy documents on space have been issued, including the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept and the NATO Commercial Space Strategy (2025), as well as broader strategic frameworks such as the NATO 2030 Agenda. Notably, the 2022 Strategic Concept identifies the growing influence of China and Russia in international politics, particularly in counter-space technologies and outer space activities, as a significant challenge to Allied security (NATO 2022). This underscores that state actors such as China and Russia, whose space capabilities and ambitions are comparable or nearly comparable to NATO's, have developed ambitious programs that drive the Alliance to strengthen its space security policies and maintain strategic stability in the space domain.

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CHINA AND RUSSIA AS STRATEGIC SPACE POWERS: A CHALLENGE TO NATO'S SECURITY FRAMEWORK

The year 2019 is widely regarded as a pivotal moment for NATO's space policies for several reasons. First, it marked a significant shift and escalation in the Alliance's strategic focus on space. Second, NATO formally recognized space as a new operational domain, alongside air, land, sea, and cyberspace, acknowledging that space-based assets are increasingly vital for collective security and prosperity. Third, in the same year, the Alliance adopted the Overarching Space Policy, signaling a formal institutional commitment to space as a strategic priority.

NATO's Overarching Space Policy is critical because it highlights the multi-dimensional role of space in the Alliance's security framework. It emphasizes space's critical contribution not only to deterrence and defense capabilities but also to a wide range of civilian and strategic sectors, including weather monitoring, environmental and agricultural management, transportation, science, communications, and banking.

NATO's growing strategic focus on space and the development of related policy documents have been driven in large part by the ambitious space programs of China and Russia. To fully understand the strategic significance of space for the Alliance, it is essential to analyze the space policies of these two nations. Both China and Russia aspire to become leading actors in space. Through their expanding activities and missions, they collectively pose a significant challenge to NATO's security framework in the 21st-century space domain.

China

China's space sector has been among the fastest-growing in the world over the past decade. Notable achievements include humanity's first successful landing on the far side of the Moon in 2019 with the Chang'e 4 mission and the Chang'e 5 robotic mission in 2020, which collected and returned samples from the lunar surface. This accomplishment marked the first triumphant lunar sample return since the Soviet mission in 1976 (Hilborne 2020, 5–6). In addition, China has outlined its national mid- and long-term development policies for space science missions and research, including missions to Mars, Venus, and Jupiter, as well as plans to establish a global lunar research station by 2025 through the Space Exploration Plan (Na 2024).

China's commercial space industry has also experienced remarkable growth since 2014, driven by goals of stimulating innovation and creating new financial channels. Several key factors, including government policies, technological advances, commercialization efforts, and funding mechanisms from both government and public institutions, support this growth. The Chinese government has played a central role in shaping strategies and long-term objectives for the space sector. It has been a significant source of support for China's commercial space industry, particularly up until 2023. Following the impacts of COVID-19, the trade war, and related challenges, public actors intervened to address funding shortfalls, leading to increased investment from a variety of state sources, including provincial and municipal development funds, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, major universities, and other institutions (European Space Policy Institute 2024, 20–21).

Figure 1 illustrates trends in Chinese commercial space funding over the years.

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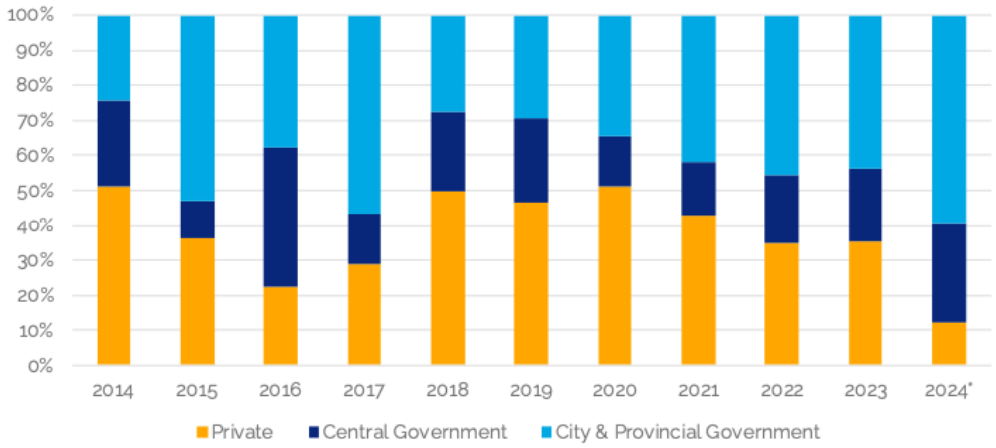

Figure 1: Trends in Chinese Commercial Space Funding Over Time (Source: ESPI 2024, 20)

The space sector, including both commercial and strategic activities such as the development of military satellite systems, national security initiatives, space-based intelligence, and deep space exploration, is considered a critical element of China's national policy, as the country seeks to gain a competitive edge in space (Pollpeter et al. 2020, 9). This priority is clearly reflected in the statements of Chinese political leaders and officials. For example, President Xi Jinping stated: "To explore the vast cosmos, develop the space industry, and build China into a space power is our eternal dream" (China National Space Administration 2022).

Analysts commonly cite the space sector's role in China's national development, its competition with the US and Russia in high-tech industries, its growing wealth, and efforts to boost national pride as key drivers of the country's enthusiasm for space (Pollpeter et al. 2020, 10). These factors, which enhance national strength, wealth, and prestige, are not unique to China but are common drivers of space programs in other nations as well (Hilborne 2020, 9).

China's space policy rests on three main pillars: national development, military empowerment, and great power competition. National development and military empowerment have been integral components of China's space program since its initial efforts in the 1950s, closely linked to the pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities (Julienne 2021, 13–14). The third pillar, great power competition, has gained prominence over the past decade, particularly since Xi Jinping assumed the presidency in 2012. This pillar reflects a perspective on space reminiscent of Cold War-era thinking, where a country's space capabilities serve as a key indicator of its power in the international system, as exemplified by the space race between the US and the USSR (Julienne 2021, 14–15). Under Xi Jinping, China's space policy has been fully integrated into its core national strategy, with space viewed as a critical factor in the country's pursuit of technological leadership. This integration aligns closely with his vision of the "China Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" (Kashevarova and Panova 2023, 2; Pollpeter et al. 2020, 11).

Since 2016, China has made rapid progress in its space industry, including the completion of both the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System and a high-resolution Earth observation system. The country has also advanced its satellite communication and broadcasting capabilities, completed the final phase of its three-step lunar exploration program, and begun constructing the initial modules of its space station. Most notably, China achieved its

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first landing beyond the Earth–Moon system with the Tianwen-1 mission, followed by Mars exploration (China National Space Administration 2022).

Building on these achievements, China announced its Space Exploration Plan in 2024, aiming to become a global leader in space science and technology by 2050. The plan was jointly released by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the China National Space Administration, and the China Manned Space Agency (Na 2024). These institutions form the backbone of China's space landscape, managing international cooperation and official governmental space activities. Other organizations, such as the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) and the China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation, primarily support the country's space programs and activities as instrumental bodies (Julienne 2021, 5–6).

The Space Exploration Plan is notable for marking the first time China has set national mid- and long-term policies for space science missions and research. It outlines five major scientific themes, the extreme universe, space-time ripples, panoramic view of Sun-Earth, habitable planets, and biological and physical sciences in space, and seventeen priority areas to achieve its objectives from 2024 to 2050. These include missions to Mars, Venus, and Jupiter, as well as the establishment of a global lunar research station by 2025 (Na 2024).

The program also specifies a three-phase roadmap covering 2024–2027, 2028–2035, and 2036–2050, with specific goals for each phase. During the first phase (2024–2027), the focus will be on space station operations, manned lunar exploration, the fourth phase of the lunar exploration program, planetary exploration, and the approval of five to eight space science satellite missions. The second phase (2028–2035) will prioritize the construction of the international lunar research station and up to 15 scientific satellite missions. The third phase (2036–2050) will focus on launching more than 30 space science missions (Na 2024).

China's achievements in space are significant milestones, such as the Tianwen-1 Mars landing and the Chang'e-4 mission, which became the first to land on the far side of the Moon. These accomplishments, together with the objectives outlined in official programs, serve as concrete indicators of China's strategic efforts to position itself as a leader in space. While China publicly emphasizes peaceful goals in space, its military activities remain largely opaque, generating international concern regarding the more strategic aspects of its ambitions. Overall, it is clear that China will continue to advance in this highly competitive field, intensifying global space competition in the coming years.

Russia

Historically, Russia has been a major player in space activities. Yuri Gagarin's pioneering achievement in 1961, becoming the first human in space, was not only a milestone for humanity but also a profound source of national pride for Russia (Vidal 2021, 11). Although the dissolution of the Soviet Union weakened Russia's space program, mainly due to difficulties in adapting to new industrial conditions (Radin et al. 2025, 3), the past decade has introduced additional risks to a program that had been sustained for decades. These risks were further exacerbated by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Ukraine in 2022, which were followed by sanctions and embargoes that placed the country in a financially and technologically challenging position (Pohl 2023, 3).

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Several commercial companies have also withdrawn services from Russia due to the threat of sanctions, primarily from the United States and other Western powers, if they continued to cooperate during the Russia–Ukraine conflict (Dickey and Gleason 2024, 31). Additionally, multiple cooperative projects with Western partners were either cancelled or constrained by funding limitations (Luzin 2024, 1). For example, Germany terminated all bilateral space cooperation with Russia. At the same time, the European Space Agency announced in 2022 that it would discontinue joint missions with Roscosmos, including Luna 25, 26, and 27, as well as the ExoMars mission (Pohl 2023, 3–4).

One of the most significant disruptions occurred in the context of the International Space Station (ISS). In 2024, Roscosmos announced plans to build and deploy a new Russian space station by 2030. This initiative is intended to allow Russia to conduct research and technological development independently, tasks previously carried out under the ISS but constrained by international agreements. Although Russia has been a key partner of the ISS since its construction in the 1990s, collaboration became increasingly complex following the invasion of Ukraine. Currently, Russia plans to end its ISS partnership in 2028, an extension from an initially announced 2024 exit (Sauer 2022).

As part of this project, Russia also aims to develop new spacecraft and upgrade its launch infrastructure. Roscosmos head Yuri Borisov emphasized the importance of a new space station, stating that it would "solve problems of scientific and technological development, national economy, and national security that are not achievable on the Russian segment of the ISS due to technological limitations and the constraints of international agreements" (Dixit 2024).

These challenges have hindered Russia's ability to remain at the forefront of space activities and placed it at a disadvantage relative to rising space powers. While the United States and the European Union continue to maintain a strong presence in space, new actors, particularly in Asia, including China, India, and Japan, have launched ambitious national programs and emerged as significant competitors (Vidal 2021, 14–15).

Despite these challenges, Russia continues to pursue an ambitious, military-oriented space program. Since President Vladimir Putin came to power, he has emphasized the development of national space activities, placing space policy at the top of Russia's domestic and foreign agenda, as space capabilities are perceived as a key indicator of international standing (Aliberti and Lisitsyna 2018, 1).

Russia's space priorities for 2030 focus on two main goals: maintaining the presence of Russian astronauts in outer space and using lower-cost, consumer-grade electronics in satellites instead of specialized space-grade components (Luzin 2024, 1). These activities are primarily funded through state programs, which are viewed not only as crucial for national power and sovereignty but also as long-term symbols of Russia's international prestige (Luzin 2024, 2).

Russia's space programs inherently include a military dimension, reflecting the involvement of both Roscosmos and the Russian Space Forces. Unlike counterparts such as NASA and the European Space Agency, Roscosmos integrates military considerations into the development of its space programs and activities. In parallel, the Russian Space Forces play a direct role in coordinating space operations (Vidal 2021, 15). Therefore, Russia's space strategy is jointly shaped by these two institutions.

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In general, Russia's objectives in space are to facilitate the exploration and utilization of outer space in ways that contribute to the country's socioeconomic development, scientific advancement, and technological progress. Additionally, Russia's military doctrine regarding space emphasizes two primary principles: the potential for jamming and radio interference, and offensive capabilities against ground-based space infrastructure (Vidal 2021, 14–15).

Over the years, Russia has implemented several significant space programs, including the Federal Space Programme 2006–2015, the Federal Target Programme for the Development of Russian Cosmodromes, and the Federal Target Programme for the Redeployment of GLONASS (Aliberti and Lisitsyna 2018, 1). Its most recent initiative, "Space Activity of Russia by 2030," outlines the country's short- and long-term goals in space and serves as an updated version of the earlier program, "Space Activity of Russia 2013–2020." This program includes two subprograms: "Priority Innovation Projects of the Space Industry" and "Ensuring Implementation of Space Activity of Russia 2013–2020." These subprograms encompass both civilian and military initiatives, such as the GLONASS satellite navigation system, which primarily serves military purposes, and the Plesetsk Cosmodrome, Russia's leading facility for military orbital launches (Luzin 2024, 2).

CONCLUSION

In the 21st century, space has firmly established itself as a distinct and multifaceted field in international relations, encompassing legal, economic, political, cultural, and technological dimensions. As a result, it has become a prominent issue on the agendas of states, international organizations, and the private sector. Today, a wide range of disciplines, from security and economics to law, sociology, and psychology, are exploring the possibilities offered by space. In this new era, it is essential to holistically address the various dimensions and relationships of space.

The emergence of new space, particularly as the operational domain of private companies and other non-state actors, has prompted significant changes in the policies, visions, and objectives of traditional space actors. This trend is expected to accelerate in the coming years, highlighting that space is no longer solely the domain of states. The designation of space as the fifth domain of international security, alongside land, sea, air, and cyberspace, has compelled both state and non-state actors to develop and implement new policies and strategies regarding space.

NATO provides a notable example of this trend. The Alliance formally recognized space as a critical domain for the security of its members in 2018, reflecting its growing importance across multiple sectors. Building on this recognition, NATO designated space as a new operational domain in 2019 to address emerging opportunities and challenges in the field. Since then, several key policy documents have been adopted, including NATO's Overarching Space Policy (2019), the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, the NATO Commercial Space Strategy (2025), and broader strategic frameworks such as the NATO 2030 Agenda.

Russia and China's expanding roles in space have been a recurring focus in these NATO documents, as both countries pursue ambitious programs to consolidate their status as major space powers. While Russia, alongside the United States, has the longest history of space exploration and was a leading actor during the Cold War, China's recent achievements

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increasingly challenge that legacy. As discussed previously, Russia's space program has faced significant constraints in recent years. Events such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war against Ukraine in 2022 triggered Western sanctions and embargoes, placing the country in a financially and technologically difficult position and limiting its ability to sustain progress in space programs.

In contrast, China has made substantial advances over the last decade, with missions such as the Tianwen-1 Mars landing and the Chang'e-4 mission, which became the first to land on the far side of the Moon. These achievements are widely regarded as key indicators of China's ambition to become a leader in space activities. Compared to Russia, China is likely to continue advancing in this highly competitive field, driven by national and broader international objectives. Consequently, this trajectory not only intensifies global competition in space but also reinforces NATO's perception of China as a significant emerging challenge in the space domain.

This study primarily relies on qualitative document analysis of publicly available policy documents, official statements, and scholarly literature. As such, it may not fully capture the complete scope of classified or internal strategic considerations, particularly in the military aspects of Russia and China's space programs. The study also emphasizes strategic and policy dimensions, and does not provide a detailed technical or engineering analysis of space programs. Furthermore, while the research highlights key trends and developments in NATO, Russia, and China's space activities, the rapidly evolving nature of space technology and international relations means that findings are limited to the timeframe and sources examined. Future research could expand on this study by incorporating real-time developments, private-sector innovations, and broader international collaborations.

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Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World

By Anne Applebaum (Author) (Publisher: Doubleday/Penguin Random House 2024)

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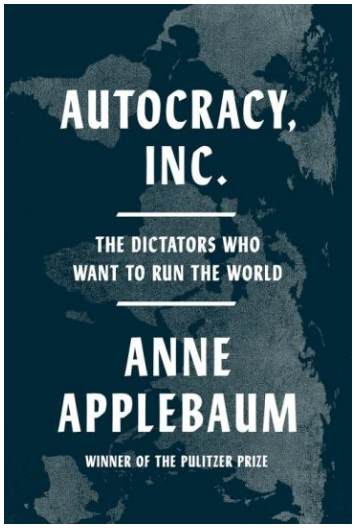

The caricature of authoritarianism, with a "bad guy" at the top, a police and army under his command, a few evil accomplices, and a handful of brave opponents, no longer reflects the reality of the twenty-first century. In this regard, Anne Applebaum demonstrates in this book that today's autocracies do not operate as one-person pyramids but as complex networks of state and parastatal corporations, kleptocratic oligarchs, security complexes, and propaganda machines. These networks are not only interconnected within each country but also maintain deep connections across borders. Ideological commonality is not necessarily the basis of these connections; instead, they are often rooted in "deals" and mutual benefit. This argument is clearly stated from the opening pages and forms the conceptual foundation of the book.

The book is structured with an introduction and five chapters: "Greed That Binds," "Kleptocracy Metastasizes," "Controlling the Narrative," "Changing the Operating System," "Smearing the Democrats," and concludes with "Epilogue: Democrats United." As the reader progresses, the narrative shifts from the political economy of rent and kleptocracy to information engineering, then to the transformation of the international order, and finally to the confrontation with democratic forces. Through this progression, the author guides the reader from financial and security mechanisms to the informational and normative battleground.

In the chapters, Applebaum illustrates how Venezuela, for example, sustains its "unlikely" relationships with Iran, Russia, China, Cuba, and Turkey as an unpopular regime by leveraging oil, gold, sanctions evasion, and anti-democratic countermobilizations. Secret oil sales through networks of shell companies, purchases of dual-use parts for Russian military contractors, and gold and food trades illuminate the links between the shadow economy and security. Amidst these narratives, Applebaum poses a pointed question that gives the reader a tangible sense of a "network," not a "block": "How many similar schemes remain undiscovered?"

The chapter "Controlling the Narrative" is particularly significant. While discussing "money laundering" in the corporate world, Applebaum also characterizes media outlets such as RT, PressTV, Telesur, and CGTN as "clip factories" and "feeders of human/social networks."

The linking of Xinhua and RT offices in Africa, the reproduction of messages in multiple languages, and the coexistence of real and fake accounts mirror the tactics observed during the 2016 US election with the Internet Research Agency content farms, which were later exported to African and Latin American media markets. The objective was to convey a single message: democracy equals disorder and corruption, whereas autocracy equals order and efficiency.

A striking example is Japan's "Kansai Airport" incident, which illustrates the effectiveness of disinformation, from an anonymous Chinese-affiliated website generating fake images to Taiwanese media coverage and the tragic consequences for a diplomat. The Japanese government later confirmed that no "Chinese buses" were involved. By tracing the chain of anonymous websites, online accounts, and mainstream media coverage, Applebaum demonstrates how internal polarization within democracies fuels emotional manipulation.

The author also traces the convergence of Chinese and Russian information operations with examples from 2023–2024, from fake "weather weapon" images in Maui to the use of MAGA symbols to attack President Biden. Conspiracies such as "Ukrainian biolabs," propagated by Russian and Chinese sources and echoed in US networks, show how an international echo chamber is constructed through both formal and informal actors, leaving a lasting perceptual impact even after official denials.

At the normative and institutional level, the book examines the gradual shift in the "software of order" from the language of "desirable pluralism" to parallel institutional arrangements such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS. Principles of "non-intervention," "recognition of sovereignty," and "avoidance of mutual criticism" within these forums promote a model of "rule by law", where "law" reflects the will of the ruler. Reflecting on the history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and post–World War II hopes, Applebaum reminds us that these parallel institutions are more than symbolic; they actively redefine the rules of the international system.

Another strength of the book is its demonstration of the "civil death" of dissidents and the transboundary nature of repression, evident in assassinations and harassment of dissidents in Europe and the United States, as well as quasi-legal agreements for the return of exiles. By citing examples from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Thailand, and Turkey, Applebaum shows how a state's security definitions can extend beyond its borders, rendering the free life of exiles unsafe.

Nonetheless, there are some criticisms. Methodologically, the precise operationalization of concepts such as "connectivity intensity" and "degree of membership" within the "Autocracy, Inc." network is not adequately explained. The text references "financial, information, and security linkages" but does not provide measurable metrics, such as network centrality indicators, institutional affiliations, or the weight of financial flows. Opportunities to move from event-driven narratives to network modeling, particularly in chapters discussing China/Russia convergence in online tactics, are not fully realized.

Additionally, the selection of examples often favors the argument for an authoritarian network. Cases like Venezuela, Belarus, and Zimbabwe confirm the "profit-oriented ecosystem" hypothesis, but less attention is given to "marginal" or inconsistent cases, such as instances where ties with democracies limited repression or created intra-coalitional divisions. This asymmetry could have been addressed by carefully examining counterexamples.

The connection between norms and tools is also underdeveloped. While Applebaum highlights the erosion of rights-based language and the rise of parallel institutionalization, she does not translate these insights into a "prioritized policy toolbox." For example, it is not clearly specified which corporate ownership gaps should be closed, which content labeling practices should be standardized, or which arrangements for monitoring dual-use items would be most effective.

Despite these shortcomings, the book makes a significant contribution to international relations literature. Conceptually, it shifts the lens from "isolated authoritarianisms" to "connected authoritarianisms," framing the global political economy, information security, and the geopolitics of norms. Empirically, it demonstrates why traditional tools such as sanctions or normative statements are insufficient when intermediary networks in democracies, banks, real estate markets, shell companies, and platforms play a structural role in rent cycles. At the normative level, it highlights the distinction between "rule of law" and "rule by law" as central to contemporary global order competition.

The text suggests four policy recommendations aligned with its arguments: First, close shell companies by implementing strict transparency standards on ultimate beneficial ownership across sectors such as real estate, energy, and precious metals, as illustrated by the Venezuela-Russia-China oil/parts network. Second, establish common anti-"information laundering" standards across platforms and public media in democratic countries. Third, strengthen regional cooperation on dual-use component export controls and supply chain tracking, focusing on intermediary links that facilitate sanctions evasion. Fourth, provide targeted support for civil society facing "civil death," including legal protection, emergency exit routes, and secure financial support, since the survival of opposition forces is essential for dialogue and political reform.

Ultimately, "Autocracy, Inc." serves as both a timely policy map and a warning. It offers a vivid depiction of the financial, informational, and security connections sustaining contemporary authoritarianism. Its primary value lies in precisely defining the problem and mapping the geography of connections, from oil and gold chains to the circulation of parallel narratives and institutions. While some academic readers may desire measurable network models or a prioritized policy toolbox, the book provides ample fuel for further research. Concepts such as an "authoritarian entanglement index" or measurement of the "information laundering spillover effect" could be explored. For scholars of international relations and those interested in economic security and digital governance, this book is both essential and provocative.

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The Trump Revolution: A New Order of Great Powers

By Aleksandr Dugin (Author) (Publisher: Arktos Media Limited 2025)

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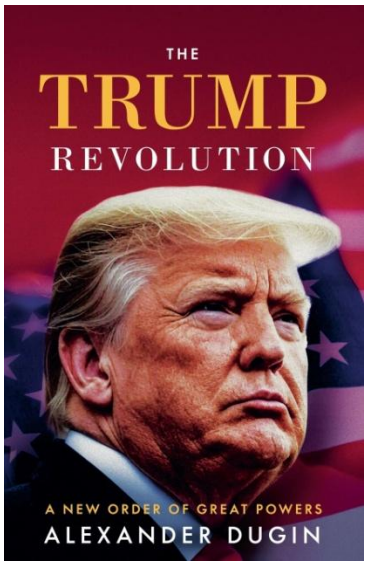

This book review provides a critical evaluation of Alexander Dugin's "The Trump Revolution: A New Order of Great Powers" (Arktos 2025) from a Chinese International Relations perspective. Drawing on Chinese academic debates on multipolarity, development-oriented statecraft, and institution-centered engagement, the review examines Dugin's characterization of Trumpism as a "post-liberal civilizational revolution" emerging from the erosion of the liberal international order (p. 16). The analysis is methodological rather than normative, situating the book within broader theoretical discussions in IR, particularly concerning multipolarity, civilizational politics, and great-power ordering, and assessing the explanatory scope and empirical alignment of Dugin's Russia-centered framework when considered through China's approaches to global order and systemic transformation.

Dugin frames world politics through a land–sea dyad, contrasting a resurgent "land-based civilization" with "maritime hegemony," and interprets Trump's electoral success as evidence of an emerging multipolar order (pp. 26–27). This binary, however, oversimplifies complex rivalries and obscures divergent interests among the so-called "civilization-states."

From a Chinese analytical perspective, the book serves as a heuristic that illustrates how Russia-centered civilizational thinking can misinterpret China's strategy. China is not the continental subordinate implied in Dugin's narrative; instead, it pursues a pragmatic, institution-centered, and flexible approach to multipolarity, grounded in multilateral engagement and discursive adaptability, rather than a "decoupling revolution."

The book advances five interconnected claims about global transformation, tracing a Russia-centered multipolar order from civilizational "decoupling" to a proposed "new Yalta," a hierarchical great-power settlement intended to stabilize competition (pp. 12–13).

Dugin portrays Trump as the pivotal agent in dismantling liberal globalism, interpreting "America First" as a shift from universalist imperialism toward sovereign great-power politics. He envisions the United States aligning with civilization-states such as Russia, China, and India to form a "distributed order of great powers." This claim is more programmatic than evidentiary, as

later debates over reduced US commitments and episodic discussions of rapprochement with Russia are cited as suggestive rather than conclusive (Wang 2024). From a Chinese analytical perspective, Beijing has strengthened sovereignty and resilience through the dual-circulation strategy (*shuang xunhuan*), prioritizing domestic robustness while maintaining selective external linkages (Zhang 2021). China emphasizes pragmatic cooperation and mutual benefit rather than alignment based on civilizational affinity.

Rejecting Huntington's "Islam vs. the West" framework and a simplified US–China binary, Dugin reframes conflict as an internal schism within the West: a "land-based civilization" of traditionalist heartlands versus a "maritime civilization" of coastal liberal elites. His notion of a "distributed Heartland" internalizes civilizational conflict within states and cites China's inland nationalism and technological self-reliance, including advances in 5G and AI, as a model for resisting cosmopolitan elites (Duan and Du 2020). While conceptually inventive, this approach compresses the interaction between domestic cleavages and international structures that jointly shape civilizational identities.

Dugin treats "decoupling," popularized in US discourse by Vice President Mike Pence in 2019, as both a symbol and a driver of systemic fragmentation, aimed at reducing strategic reliance on China (Brühl 2024; Garcia-Macia and Goyal 2021). He contends that China, Russia, Iran, and India are reconfiguring technological, financial, and cultural ties with the West to consolidate autonomous civilizational cores. Renewed US–China trade frictions and the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative across the Global South lend prima facie plausibility to aspects of this trend (Zhai 2025). Nevertheless, China's stated posture emphasizes "reformist embeddedness" rather than outright decoupling. As a 2023 government report notes: "China adheres to the basic national policy of opening up to the outside world, steadfastly pursuing an open strategy of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation… opposing protectionism, opposing 'building walls and barriers' or 'decoupling and breaking chains'… and promoting the liberalization and facilitation of trade and investment" (State Council Information Office 2023). This strategic flexibility diverges sharply from Dugin's framework.

Dugin further posits a value-based convergence between Trumpism and Putinism, anchored in sovereignty and the rejection of liberal progressivism, culminating in a "conservative civilizational alliance" vis-à-vis the European Union. This claim rests on contestable premises. Russia's Eurasian project is widely viewed as relying on coercive, hierarchy-seeking instruments (Flockhart and Korosteleva 2022), which sit uneasily alongside Trumpism's transactional retrenchment and sovereignty-first unilateralism. The resulting vision of a US–Russia condominium appears more normative than descriptively sustainable. From a Chinese analytical perspective, the "alliance" frame misinterprets Beijing's posture. Coordination with Moscow remains selective and domain-specific, mediated through institution-centered platforms such as BRICS rather than consolidated into a bloc (Zhai 2025). In Chinese discourse, multipolarity is understood as development-centered balancing that emphasizes connectivity, diversification, and standards-setting, rather than ideological alignment (Luo et al. 2025).

Reviving Mackinder's Heartland thesis, Dugin outlines a "World-Island" architecture alongside a "new Yalta" of civilizational spheres. In this scenario, Russia, China, and a Trump-led United States would jointly supersede or marginalize the United Nations and Atlantic institutions, while each civilization governs its sphere autonomously. This design presupposes durable alignment between the United States and China, which conflicts with ongoing frictions

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over the South China Sea, Taiwan, and technology controls. As realist scholars note, multipolarity more often generates balancing and recurrent contests for advantage than stable concord (Mearsheimer 2019), rendering Dugin's optimistic scenario difficult to sustain. The gap between this blueprint and contemporary rivalry underscores the speculative nature of his proposed order.

China's official discourse on multipolarity emphasizes pragmatism, development, and institution-centered engagement, sharply contrasting with Dugin's binary and confrontational vision. Whereas Dugin depicts world politics as a zero-sum struggle between land-based and maritime civilizations, China foregrounds a development-oriented approach through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the BRICS framework, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). As Zhai (2025) observes, this orientation is closely linked to the concept of a "community of shared future for mankind," which prioritizes multilateral dialogue and inclusive growth. This outlook diverges fundamentally from Dugin's civilizational antagonism (Qin 2023).

Dugin's argument also contains a theoretical tension. Having rejected liberal universalism, he nevertheless proposes a Yalta-style civilizational pact premised on stable spheres of influence and mutual recognition. However, his advocacy of radical decoupling and ideological mobilization points in the opposite direction, leaving unclear how a durable equilibrium could be sustained amid deliberate rupture. This tension undermines the coherence of his multipolar design.

Empirically, the framework fits uneasily with observable policy trajectories. China's "dual circulation" strategy balances domestic innovation with selective global integration rather than comprehensive decoupling (Zhang 2021). In technology, advances in areas such as 5G and renewable energy, particularly within the Huawei ecosystem, have helped China navigate Western restrictions while providing replicable models for Global South partners (Sun 2024). Within BRICS, China has moved less toward bloc leadership and more toward infrastructure-oriented partnerships that support resilient supply chains and regional connectivity (Luo, Wang, and Dong 2025). The divergence from Dugin's vision is therefore both structural and tactical.

From a Chinese analytical standpoint, this book is best read as a provocative heuristic rather than a policy guide. Its civilizational essentialism and maximalist vocabulary of "decoupling" and "reconstruction" may resonate rhetorically, but they depart from the discursive flexibility and institutional embeddedness that characterize China's external engagement. The projected alignment among Russia, China, and a Trump-led United States presupposes a convergence of normative orders that is difficult to reconcile with China's diversified posture and preference for issue-specific coordination through multilateral platforms (Zhai 2025).

For Global South actors, the book's emphasis on sovereignty and civilizational autonomy gestures toward potential repertoires of resistance to Western dominance, but this must be disentangled from the confrontational ethos of Dugin's manifesto. A more transferable insight lies in the strategic value of connectivity, infrastructure, and technological capacity, as illustrated by BRICS-related initiatives and the African uptake of Chinese digital infrastructure (Zhai 2025). As Zhang (2018) observes, multilateral coordination and development-oriented statecraft remain among the most viable tools for navigating fragmentation without intensifying geopolitical antagonism.

Alexander Dugin's "The Trump Revolution: A New Order of Great Powers" is less a conventional geopolitical analysis than an ideological manifesto. It fuses Eurasianism,

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civilizational multipolarity, anti-liberal narratives, and the mythologization of Trumpism into a traditionalist counterproject to global liberalism. To its credit, the book clarifies the normative logic and symbolic appeal of civilizational geopolitics at a moment of perceived liberal retreat. Its value lies less in predictive accuracy than in revealing a distinct intellectual style of world-order thinking.

At the same time, its empirical grounding and policy feasibility remain limited. The book ultimately functions as a mirror of discursive contestation, "othering" China and Russia even as it frames them as "civilization-states." Its primary contribution is therefore heuristic: it highlights how multipolarity is operationalized in practice through institutional reform, infrastructural coordination, and discursive flexibility, rather than through bloc alignment or civilizational rupture.

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